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Volume 10, Number 2
April, 1949

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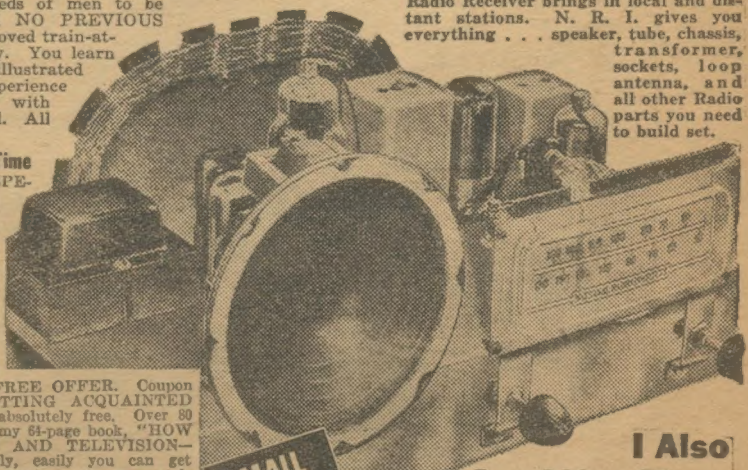

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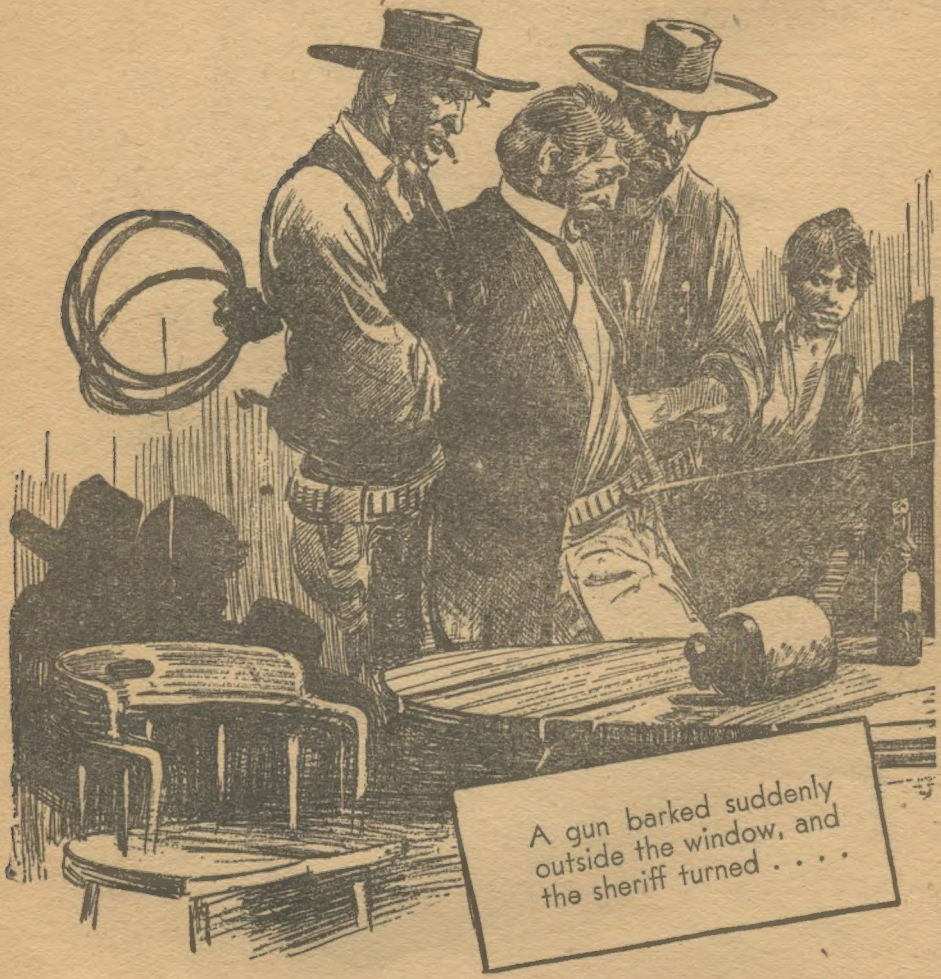
by ELI COLTER



They were a quarrelsome pair, Harry and Ames, yet staunch friends who'd stop blacking each other's eyes to stand together against a common enemy. Then came the quarrel over the question of what time the sun went down, and a twin-killing. Had the pair killed each other? And what was the significance of Willy Gilbert's blank past, and the unknown gent who had run away with Amos' wife years past? It would all come to a head at sundown . . .

For Sundown

THE TWO men sat lingering over their drinks, their glasses on the small card table between them, in the front end of the saloon near the entrance doors.

Lance Larribee, from his Stetson hat and cowhide vest to his spurred and hand-tooled high-heeled boots, was the complete westerner. Don Wharton wore a ten-gallon sombrero too, but it didn't sit on his head as if it belonged there; he wore cowboy boots, but he hadn't yet learned to walk easily in them. His flannel shirt and jeans didn't fit familiarly, as does long-accustomed garb. If he wasn't the complete tenderfoot, he was at least a transplanted easterner still a trifle unacclimated to the west.

Wharton was saying, "It's so damned silly, Lance! Friends for years, and now they're enemies. The idea! Two grown men quarrelling, coming to blows, over what time the sun sets!"

Lance Larribee pushed his high-crowned black hat off his forehead, and chuckled. The sheriff's badge on his cowhide vest glimmered in the hot noon-day sunlight filtered through the dusty front windows. "Yeah, Harry and Amos been old tillicums for quite a while. Fight like cats and dogs, but it don't mean noth-

in'; varies the monotony and keeps 'em in condition. They'd fight *for* each other just as fast."

"But it means something this time, Sheriff!" Wharton protested. "I wish you'd talk to them before they do each other any real injury."

Lance Larribee said, "Hum." His alert ears had caught the sound of hurrying feet on the sidewalk approaching the saloon; he recognized Willy Gilbert's rapid, light footsteps, and turned his gaze curiously toward the weathered swing doors. What would cause Willy to be in such a rush, he wondered. He said to Wharton, "They been at it ever since I knowed 'em, and they ain't never really hurt each other yet, Don.

Wharton grew impatient, annoyed at the sheriff's lack of perturbation. He went on excitedly, "Amos said it set at seven-thirty and Harry held out for eight o'clock. Amos sent Harry down the road talking to himself with a black eye and a bloody jaw; and Harry said something about fixing Amos good for that. You really ought to see that they don't hurt each other; there's always a first time."

Larribee laughed in relish. "Oh, so 'twas Harry got the worst of it this time! Good! It's usually Amos gits the black eye or the skinned nose."

The swing doors opened and Willy Gilbert came in. The sheriff was still watching. Other heads, of men at the bar, turned to glance Willy's way. The bartender waved at him.

Joe Beldon called, "Come get your nose wet, Willy. I'll buy."

Willy shook his head. "Thanks. Later. Ain't got time right now. I got to see Lance."

Beldon said, "Okay, kid. Any time."

Willy went hurrying on toward the table where Lance Larribee set across from Don Wharton. He stopped close to the sheriff.

Larribee looked up inquiringly. "Somethin' botherin' you, Willy?"

Willy nodded, there was agitation in his clear gray eyes, his voice lowered almost to a whisper. "Yeah. I done heard somethin' funny; I wisht you'd come listen to it, Lance."

Larribee rose with genial willingness, looking down at Wharton with a parting grin. "I got to go with Willy, now, Don. Don't you worry about Harry Forrest and Amos Kittridge; they're gittin' about old enough to take care of theirselves right good, I reckon."

THERE WERE three men at the bar and four at the poker table, none of whom paid any attention to the sheriff as he started for the swing doors with Willy Gilbert. Don Wharton deserted the table and followed them out onto the one main street of Red Bluff.

The street lay north to south. The business area was encompassed in four blocks. On the east side of the street along these four blocks, huddled cheek by jowl as if to keep one another company, were general store and hotel, livery and smithy, the *Three-Star Saloon* and *Ma Kelly's Kitchen*, and like enterprises compatible to man's need in country friendly to both cattlemen and miners.

On the opposite, the west side of the street, the empty store buildings —some protected by boarding and others abandoned to the elements, with broken windows and sagging doors—were remainders of Red Bluff's boom days; they'd been vacated when the flash in the pan gold rush petered out, leaving that section of Nevada to the cattlemen, with only a few diehards hanging on, like Amos Kittredge and Harry Forrest, to pick over the dump tailings and prowl old prospect holes, looking for a missed vein.

At either end of the business blocks stretched dwellings of varied character, from *Ma Kelly's* neat white cottage at the north, to Doc Baird's home-office-mortuary on the south, a couple of hundred houses and hovels, and a hundred rickety old miner's cabins never to be lived in again. On both sides of the street, houses and trees; the farther from the business blocks the more the trees and the fewer the houses.

Willy struck directly across the vacant side of the town, the sheriff close at his elbow, Don Wharton still tagging curiously behind.

Larribee asked, "What was it you heard, Willy? Wha'd it sound like?"

Willy glanced up uneasily at the sheriff's towering bulk. "Well, I don't just rightly know. Sounded kind of somethin' that was a cross between a dog whimperin' and a horse wheezin'; it scared the hell out of me."

"Where at was you when you heard it?"

"Down thataway." Willy pointed south. "Just beyond that old slab cabin yander."

They reached the deserted miner's cabin and passed it, Wharton still following along, a trifle closer to them now.

Then Willy caught at the sheriff's arm, his gaze widening in renewed excitement. "There! I told you! There it is again. Hear it?"

Larribee nodded. He couldn't help hearing it. Willy had described it accurately; it *did* sound like a cross between a dog whimpering and a horse wheezing.

Willy shivered. "It's c r e e p y ! W-what is it, Lance?"

Larribee said, "It's a man. Hurt, or been runnin' hard." He sent a sidelong meaning glance at Wharton, who had now joined them. "Just a minute, Willy. Go on back to the *Three-Star* and tell Joe Beldon I sent you."

Willy said, "All right. Be with you in a minute, Lance." He turned and went scurrying up the street toward the saloon.

LARRIBEE said to Wharton, "Might be somethin' he hadn't oughta see. That's kind of a arrangement we got to protect Willy. Time Joe's talked to him two minutes he'll forget all about me'n you and the noise he heard. Come on, Don; we better look into this."

The sound was easy to follow. The sheriff went toward it, his solid tread kicking up the dust and leaving a little trail of flying particles behind him. He advanced well beyond the old cabin, through a belt of trees and out into a little clearing, before he saw the man, and knew before he reached him that it was too late.

The wheezing was loud, now, stentorious and painful to Amos Kittridge, lying there on his back, half-shaded by the boughs of a dropping pine, staring upward with half-glazed eyes. There was a bullet in Amos chest, high and toward the middle, and there was a froth of blood on his lips. He was on the edge of consciousness only, barely alive.

He wouldn't be alive long, Larribee told himself, as he went down on one knee and laid two fingers on Amos' pulse.

Wharton said, appalled, "My Gawd! Why should it matter to any man—that much—whether the sun sets at seven-thirty or eight?"

Larribee was hunched over the dying man. He said urgently, "You see who shot you, Amos?"

Kittridge's gray-bearded jaw fell slack. The stentorious wheezing stopped. His eyes shot. Larribee straightened and got slowly to his feet. "He'll never see nothin' again. Got it through the lungs. Rifle."

Wharton said, "It's funny nobody heard it! Hell! A rifle shot that close would have roared from one end of the street to the other."

Larribee looked at him. "Might kind of depend on the rifle, wouldn't it, Don? Seems as if I remember that Harry Forrest's got a gun about that caliber, with one of these here new-fangled silencers on it. Only one of them gadgets in Red Bluff, too. You wouldn't know where Harry is right about now, would you?"

Wharton said, "No. The last I saw of him he was going down the road, his temper still boiling, swearing to fix Amos for giving him that black eye."

"Hum. Well, we might's well send Doc Baird to pick Amos up and take care of him; he can git the bullet out for me. 'Bout a thirty-thirty, I reckon. Harry's gun's a thirty-thirty Want to come along with me, and see if we can locate Harry anywhere, Don? We won't say anything about this for the time bein'; I'll tell Doc to keep still about it. We'll stop there on our way to Harry's shack."

The two men returned to the street, and continued southward along the worn old board sidewalk. Wharton was eager to talk, but the sheriff dis-

couraged conversation bluntly. "Keep still, Don. I'm thinkin'."

He was remembering all the days he'd known Amos Kittridge. Amos had been a kindly old man, big and powerful for his years, quick to anger over small things but with a big heart in him. A silent man, too, secretive in his ways, always keeping everything he knew locked behind a tight-shut mouth. There'd been some jealously guarded happening back in Amos' life that he hadn't wanted anyone in Red Bluff to learn.

But Harry Forrest had a different make-up. Harry's tongue was loose; he'd been born that way, and he'd never learned fully how to button up his lips before too many words got out. A lot of little things slip out of a man that's that way, Larribee reflected; if it hadn't been for Harry, the sheriff would never have had the slightest inkling of the thing Amos wanted to forget.

Harry, with a drink too many under his belt, had remarked to Larribee once, "Poor Amos. Can't stop eatin' his heart out over that kid of his. And that dang woman, runnin' off with another man—" Then Harry had realized he'd said too much and closed his mouth.

LARRIBEE, recalling the instance now as he walked along beside Don Wharton, asked himself what had ever become of the errant wife and the boy. Had Amos ever known what became of them? Was the woman still living, and the other man? How old would the boy be about now? And who was the man whom the woman had liked better than old Amos?

The boy couldn't be much more than a kid still, Larribee reflected. The only other thing the sheriff had ever learned about that old affair was from one of the ranchers, repeating to Larribee a remark that Harry Forrest had let slip to him. Amos had been married once, Harry'd said, fifteen-sixteen years ago. It hadn't lasted long; couldn't expect it to. It was always a mistake for a man already in his late fifties to marry a woman as young as thirty-two. It had been less than a year ago when the rancher passed this little revelation of Harry's on to the sheriff.

Larribee heard Wharton saying loudly, "Doesn't look as if there's anybody home, Lance." The sheriff raised his gaze, roused out of his absorption in Harry Forrest.

They had come within sight of Forrest's cabin. They were almost directly opposite Doc Baird's place. They could see the front of Forrest's house; they could see that the door was wide open, and there seemed to be no one in the one room.

Larribee said, "Hum. You go tell Doc Baird to pick Amos up and see to him. Tell him to keep his mouth shut about it till he talks to me. I'll take a look around Harry's place."

Wharton turned, and started across the street, toward the winding hard dirt path which led up to the doctor's house.

Larribee went on toward Forrest's cabin. By the time he reached it, Wharton was out of sight behind the mass of trees and vines which shaded Baird's front porch and cut off all view of the street. The sheriff stepped into the cabin.

Forrest had not been visible from the sidewalk, but he was there, lying on the floor behind the open door. Within a few inches of his lifeless hand lay his rifle fitted with the silencer. Larribee didn't bend over to feel of Forrest's pulse; there was no need. Harry hadn't been dead long; the blood was still oozing from the wounds on his head.

Larribee stepped quickly outside again and closed the door. A padlock hung from a heavy iron staple driven into the door. The sheriff removed the padlock, closed the strap-iron hasp over the staple, pushed the bow through the staple and snapped the padlock shut, just as Wharton came up to rejoin him.

Larribee inquired, "See Doc?"

"Yes. He'll go right out to fetch Amos."

Larribee said, "Harry ain't here. Reckoned I might's well lock the door for him; he put that padlock there to keep the damned mule out,

and I see the mule's in the back yard."

Wharton said, "Harry can't have gone far, or he wouldn't have left the door standing open that way."

Larribee said, "Hum. You could be right. Look around for him, then if it suits you." He glanced at the shack's one window, covered by a double strip of burlap. Nobody would get far trying to look through that. "You run across Harry, tell him I want to see him. Meantime, I got to have a talk with Doc, soon's he comes back with Amos. See you later, Don." He walked off down the board sidewalk toward's Laird's house, then halted, a few yards away, and looked back at Wharton. "Hi, Don!"

"Yes, Sheriff?"

"Do *you* know what time the sun sets?"

Wharton stared. "Hell, no. I never paid any attention."

"Sets around seven-forty-five this time o' year, Don."

The sheriff went on, crossed the street, turned into the dirt path leading to Baird's vine-shaded porch, not looking back, not paying any further attention to the gaping Wharton.

2

AS LARRIBEE started up the porch steps, Dr. Baird came driving his buckboard from the back of his lot, on the way to pick up the body of Amos Kittridge. "Want to go along, Lance?"

The sheriff shook his head. "No thanks, Doc. I'll just sit and think a spell while you're gone.

Larribee moved over to the doctor's large porch rocker and dropped his big bulk into the chair. He was still sitting there, his hat pulled down over his eyes, when Baird returned with the body.

He went down off the porch and helped Baird carry Amos in through the back way, where they'd be unobserved by any chance passersby on the street. They took Amos into the doctor's work room—Doc Baird was coroner, medical examiner for the territory, as well as Justice of the Peace—and laid the body down on Baird's trestle table.

Larribee said, "Nobody seen you pick up Amos?"

"No. I took damn good care they didn't after Wharton's tellin' me you said to keep it dark; you got any idee who shot Amos, Lance?"

"Hum. Not just yet, Doc. Kind of early in the game. Say, Doc; you know what time the sun sets?"

"Eh?" Baird was removing his coat to go to work, and he stopped to stare for an instant. "Hell, anybody knows the time the sun sets. Different hours, different times of year. Right now, close to seven-forty-five. Anybody in Red Bluff could tell you that, within ten to fifteen minutes, anyway."

Larribee said, "That's close, Doc. They was both exactly within fifteen minutes of it, one late and t'other early."

Baird hung his coat over the back of a chair. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Amos and Harry," Larribee answered. "They had a fight over it. Amos said seven-thirty, Harry said eight; Amos blacked Harry's eye and cut his jaw open with his knuckles."

Baird laughed so hard that his whole lean wiry body shook. "Them loony old hellions! They never had to look hard for somethin' to scrap about, did they. But—good cripes, Lance! You ain't hintin' that you think Harry'd *shoot* old Amos over—"

"I don't. He couldn't of, very well. He's layin' over there in his shack with his head bashed in. You can go git him, too, soon as Don Wharton stops hangin' round there lookin' for him."

Baird pursed his lips in a low whistle. "Jumpin' grasshoppers! What's goin' on around here, Lance? I thought Red Bluff had turned peaceable since the boom-followers drifted on to other diggin's."

Larribee said, "And Don Wharton ain't the one 'at done it, neither, He *don't* know when the sun sets. Whoever killed Amos and Harry knows

plumb certain that the sun sets right on the dot, come seven-forty-five."

"What in hell's the sunset got to do with it?"

"I ain't sayin'." The sheriff half turned as if to leave the room, then halted and thrust his hand into his pocket. "Soon's you can fetch Harry 'thout bein' seen, here's the padlock key. He was killed with a short handled spade; his own, I reckon. It's there on the floor, a couple of feet beyond him. His rifle with the silencer on it is there near the spade."

Baird gazed down at Amos' big hard body there on the trestle table. "Amos and Harry! Friends for near twenty years, according to their own calculation. Both dead, on the same day, within a few minutes of each other. Who killed 'em, Lance? And why?"

"I ain't got no idee yet, I told you that. But as to why—is a horse of another color. They was both killed because they didn't know when the sun set; and don't ask me to go no further'n that, because I don't know no more'n that myself."

"Jumpin' holy grasshoppers! That's downright crazy, Lance!" Baird protested.

"Nope. Plum reasonable from the killer's point of view, Doc. Somethin' happened right at sunset, last few days; or somethin' is goin' to happen right at sunset next few days. If it already has happened, I got me a tough nut to crack; if it's *goin'* to happen, I got a tougher one. Because it can happen anywhere in Nye County; Nye County is my business, and it's a big county. You know anything about Amos' wife or kid, Doc?"

"Not much, Lance. Harry mentioned it to me once. Just said Amos' wife was a right pretty girl, name of Nancy, and it was a pity the kid couldn't have looked like her."

Larribee said, "Harry seems to have done a lot of mentionin' here and there. Reckon I better put me up a bulletin."

"You figure Amos was killed by that gun of Harry's, Lance?"

"Had to be. Right there on that lot across from the saloon, and nobody heard the shot. Nobody else has got one of them there silencer contraptions, that you know of, has they?"

Baird said, "No. I could swear that's the only one in town."

"You answered your own question, then. Well, I started out of here once; reckon I'll go, now."

THE SHERIFF went on out of house, back down the street to his own office. He possessed a small blackboard, kept nailed up in his front window, which he used for chalking up notices for the citizens of Red Bluff. He got a dusty wiping cloth from his battered old desk, and rubbed the blackboard clean.

Then he took a stub of chalk and wrote on the smudged black surface:

ANYBODY CAN RECOLLECT ANYTHING HARRY FORREST EVER MENTIONED ABOUT AMOS' KITTRIDGE'S PAST? ESPECIALLY ABOUT HIS WIFE AND KID. IF SO, I'D BE RIGHT MUCH OBLIGED IF YOU'D COME TELL ME ABOUT IT.

He signed it officially, *"Lance Larribee, Sheriff of Nye County."*

Then he stood back and looked at it from the sidewalk, muttering to himself. "Never can tell what's goin' to smoke a civet cat outen his hole. Anythin's worth tryin'. 'Tain't somethin' that's already happened though; cain't be. Had to be somethin' powerful urgent to drive a man to butchery like that; I'd of got a smell of it. Nope, it's somethin' that's *goin'* to happen, and Amos and Harry was killed to keep anybody else from findin' out about it. Looks as if I got some snoopin' to do. I better git at it."

Ten minutes later he went away from his office, having locked his desk and his door. He glanced back at the bulletin board as he proceeded down the street. The letters were good and big, anyone could read the notice forty feet away.

Larribee went on, talking to himself. "Hum. I got to git Willy on the job. Willy's the best spreader I ever see. Half hour after Willy reads

what's on that board, every man in the Three-Star'll know it. I reckon Joe's still holdin' him."

He moved a little faster, headed toward the saloon. It hadn't occurred to Willy yet that anything printed on the bulletin board was public property anyhow; Larribee had impressed on him long ago that notices on the boards were secrets. Willy loved to tell secrets; it was a kind of game that delighted him, and the men of Red Bluff doted on pleasing Willy. Half the men in town depended on Willy for news from the sheriff's bulletin board.

All the men in town had a soft spot in the heart for the little waif. They fed him and clothed him, and welcomed him whenever he elected to stay overnight in their cabins. They had unanimously adopted him when he'd drifted into Red Bluff three years ago. He hadn't been able to tell much about himself, beyond his age and his name. He hadn't even known where he came from. The heavy scar on the side of his head—which even his thick curly brown hair couldn't quite conceal—was the answer to the flown memory and the addled wits.

Somebody had tried to kill Willy once, but it had been long ago; Doc Baird had said the scar was years old. Whoever did it, likely believed they *had* killed him. He had a shy, winning way about him, he was always ready to do anything for anybody. He shifted from cabin to cabin, too restless to stay put in one place. He was the town's boy: it would be as much as a man's life was worth to attempt to abuse Willy Gilbert in Red Bluff.

He especially liked Doc Baird and Sheriff Larribee, though he liked all the men. Willy was never so happy as when he was in the saloon listening to the stories and laughter, bumming drinks. By common conspiracy, the men never bought him anything stronger than sarsaparilla; he was thirteen years old.

"Thirteen year old," mused Larribee, nearing the Three-Star. "And he come here three years ago. And Doc said the scar was old. When he wasn't no bigger'n knee-high, somebody whammed him on the head and left him for dead. *Now I wonder! By Godfrey, I just wonder!"*

THE SHERIFF walked into the saloon to see Willy leaning against one end of the bar, listening to some yarn Don Wharton was telling Joe Beldon and the bartender Pete.

Larribee went directly toward them, thinking fast. Amos had been married fifteen-sixteen years ago. Amos and Harry must have come to Red Bluff shortly after Amos' young wife had run off with the other man. The boy wouldn't have been more than three-four years old then. Willy had been ten when he came to Red Bluff. A boy could change a lot between the ages of three and ten; and Harry had said the boy didn't look like his mother. If Willy was Amos' boy, it was reasonable that neither Harry nor Amos would have been able to recognize him.

Willy looked up and saw Larribee coming while the sheriff was still several feet away. Larribee beckoned, and Willy came eagerly toward him, clear eyes shining under his mop of curly brown hair.

Larribee said lowly, "You ain't heard that sound again, Willy?"

Willy looked at him blankly. "What sound?"

Larribee nodded, satisfied. As usual, Willy had completely forgotten all that had passed from his immediate attention. Larribee said, "There's another secret on the bulletin board, Willy; it's a real good one this time." Willy nodded eagerly, and went hurrying out of the *Three Star*. Don Wharton had just finished his yarn, and Joe Beldon and Pete both laughed uproariously. Beldon grinned at Larribee and gestured toward the bar. Larribee joined them and ordered a whisky, stood there by Beldon, listening to the talk going on, thinking.

Money, he wondered. Could it have been for money, or the gold that exchanged for money? But Amos and Harry hadn't ever amassed any money; they'd never got more than grub stake out of the several old prospect holes they were always grub-

bing in. Or, had they? With Amos so close-mouthed, how was a man going to know? Surely Harry would have slipped and mentioned it, with that runaway tongue of his. Could it have been revenge? Had either Amos or Harry ever done anything to anybody bad enough to deserve that?

Larribee glanced down the bar. A few more men had come in. None of them was saying anything worth repeating. He wasn't going to learn anything hanging around there, Larribee concluded.

The sheriff paid for his drink and went on out of the saloon. Up the street he saw Willy just turning away from the office window, having read and memorized the words written on the bulletin board. Willy was plenty smart, Larribee reflected; not being able to remember things didn't affect his native intelligence. And he was learning to remember some things, more and more, this last year—things that he was particularly interested in. He was slowly but steadily getting better, anyone could see that; Larribee had heard several of the men speak of it, delighted at the boy's improvement.

Willy was hurrying now, almost running. Larribee stopped within a few feet of him, and Willy slowed, smiling happily. He was always smiling, always happy. Any little homely thing made Willy happy.

Larribee said, "By the way, Willy. *You* know what time the sun sets, don't you?"

Willy gave his stock answer, as Larribee had expected him to do. "Sure. It sets at six o'clock; it always sets at six o'clock." *Had it set at six o'clock when Willy was struck down,* Larribee wondered. Willy was going on, "Any time you want to know what time it is, you just wait till the sun sets, and that's six o'clock. Why—*she* told me that, didn't she! Because *he* came at six o'clock, and that was how I'd know when to look for him; when the sun set."

Larribee pounced on that. "Who told you? Your mother, Willy?"

"My mother? I guess I don't know. She was awful pretty. For a minute there I could see her!" He shook his head; the half-revealed memory had faded.

Someday, Larribee told himself, *someday he's going to remember everything,* or nearly everything. Has *that* got anything to do with what happened to Amos and Harry?

WILLY was saying, the eagerness subsided into his habitual happy placidity, "Amos and Harry oughtn't to have quarreled about that; they was both wrong."

"Oh, you remember the quarrel, do you?"

Willy said, "Sure. Because I was bad scared. I thought somebody was going to get hurt. Amos said half-past seven. Harry said eight. And they was both wrong. The sun sets at six o'clock."

Larribee asked casually, "I don't suppose you recollect if any one else was around listenin' in, do you, Willy?"

Willy looked troubled, his eyes turned vague. "I guess not. It was right there across from Doc's place. But I don't guess anyone was there, only Don Wharton. Don said it was a silly thing to quarrel about, because the sun sets at six o'clock."

"You don't always do things by the sun, do you?" Larribee prodded. "Say, now, you was goin' to be somewhere at a certain time. You wouldn't go by suntime, would you?"

Willy shook his curly head, and laughed, as if that were a foolish query. "Not me! Everybody goes by clock time, so I go by clock time, too. The clocks are nearly always wrong, but you have to go by clock time, or you'll get other people mixed up. That was why she told me sunset. And I *still* can't tell the clock time very well. The hands go round too slow."

Larribee said, "They sure do. By the by, Willy; where was you goin' tonight, at sunset by the clock?"

Willy's eyes widened in pleased surprise. "That's just the way *he* said it. Sunset by the clock. And of course that'd be six o'clock. But this is the time of year the clocks are wrong, and the sun's late; so I'll have to ask Pete. Or I won't get there in time."

Larribee said, "That's right. You ask Pete. He'll take you. Where you goin' to be at sunset by the clock, Willy? Goin' to meet somebody? Who told you to be there?"

Willy's eyes veiled, and his face turned guarded and wary. "He said for me not to tell, or half the town'd want to go along, and that'd scare 'em."

"Scare what?"

"Coyote puppies, in their nest. Coyote puppies are awfully cute."

"They sure are," Larribee agreed. "I'd like to see them puppies too, Willy. You reckon I could go along?"

"I don't think you better, Lance; you might scare the puppies away. They don't know you. He been up there lots of times. They got used to him. They ain't scared of him."

Larribee said amiably, "O k a y, Willy. You go see your puppies by yourself then. I reckon you know where the nest is?"

"Oh, sure. By the red bush."

WILLY went down the street, then, toward the *Three Star*, and Larribee kept on up street toward his office. In short time the men in the saloon were going to know word for word what was written on the blackboard. Larribee unlocked his door and went into his office. He figured he wouldn't have long to wait. He hadn't.

He'd been there less than fifteen minutes when Dick Hammond walked in. Larribee looked up from his desk absentmindedly. "Hello, Dick. Anything I can do for you?"

Hammond said, "Well, no. Other way about. Willy was tellin' us about the notice on the board. Harry made a crack to me about Amos a few months ago. Don't amount ot much."

Larribee said, "Might help. Let's have it."

"What you checkin' up on Amos for? He done something?"

"Could be, Dick. 'S what I want to find out. Wha'd Harry tell you?"

"Oh, he just said, it was kind of curious that Amos' wife'd run off with another man, and Amos never known who the man was. *Is* kind of curious, ain't it? You'd have thought he'd of seen the other man hangin' around sometime, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, I dunno, Dick. Not if the wife and the other man was middlin' cautious. With Amos away prospectin' half the time. That all?"

"That's all, Sheriff. I told you it didn't amount to much."

"Every little helps, though. Thanks, Dick."

Hammond went away. Then it was Joe Beldon came. Then it was somebody else. Within the next hour nine men dropped into the sheriff's office to report little things Harry Forrest had let slip. Sifted and put together in chronilogical order, these slips furnished Larribee with a sketchy history of Amos' tragedy.

3

HE HAD never seen the man who had taken away his wife; Amos had never even heard the man's name. The two had skipped out when Amos was away on a prospecting trip. He had traced them to the lower section of Nye County, but hadn't molested them. Amos had believed that the boy was better off with his mother, being so young. The boy was less than three when the mother went away with him, and Amos had never seen him more than half a dozen times, being away so much. But he was powerful fond of his son, always hoping the woman would maybe come back some day.

Amos and Harry had stayed close enough to keep a line on what was going on. Then the woman and the boy had both been killed in an accident. No one would ever know exactly what had happened. The woman and the boy had driven to a neighboring ranch, visiting. (The boy was then about seven or eight years old). They had never come back. The team had come home, lathered and exhausted, hides torn as if they had been attacked by a sharp-clawed mountain cat, dragging the battered wagon with one wheel off.

It had been a long time before the bodies were found, past all recognition, but easily identified by the ripped and ragged clothes. The man himself had found them, and begged for aid in bringing them home for burial—the man who had run away with the woman when she left Amos. Then, grief-stricken and seeking only to forget, he had sold the horses to a nearby rancher, left the territory, and never had been heard of again. By that time, Harry had learned the man's name, though he had kept it from Amos. That had been easy, since Harry had done all the enquiring, and Amos had stayed in the background.

The man's name was Gilbert.

Putting all these fragments of information together, Larribee had to revise his estimates a little. Amos and Harry had been right here in Red Bluff when the thing had happened. It had been from Red Bluff that Harry had kept an eye on the woman and the boy and reported to Amos. Easy enough, and no one the wiser, with Harry out on his prolonged prospecting trips.

"Hum," Larribee muttered. "That was durin' the boom days, when we was swarmin' with all kinds from everywhere. Tenderfoots and old-timers, shady crooks and honest gold-seekers. You could take your pick, and anybody could git by with anything."

He deserted his desk, went out of his office and started southward down the street. One remark, of all the others Harry had made, stood out like a smoke house in the fog. Harry had said of the man Gilbert that he was "some slick-talkin' ranny from the east; I'd guess she liked his smooth ways and his glib lingo." *"A slick-talkin' ranny from the east.*

Some men, the sheriff reflected, came from the far east and settled in the west as effortlessly as a duck sits the water. In no time at all you'd think they'd lived in the west all their lives; they fitted into its ways as comfortably as a man's hand fits into an old glove.

But there were others who didn't fit in, though Larribee couldn't fully define the reason for it even to himself. They couldn't readjust themselves to the new way of existence, just didn't belong. After they'd been in the west for ten years, they'd still give you the impression that they'd come from the east only a few months ago.

LARRIBEE turned in at Baird's dirt path. The doctor had brought in Forrest's body now, and had both men laid out in his back room. He had brought the spade that had killed Harry Forrest, the silenced rifle that had killed Amos.

He said, "You want to take the weapons to your office, Lance?"

Larribee said, "Nope. I reckon they're safer right here than anywhere else, Doc. I wanted to ask you somethin', Doc. If a right good specialist was to operate on Willy's head, you reckon the boy would git his memory back?"

Baird looked startled. "How in hell did you ever happen to ask a thing like that?"

"Oh, I dunno. Just got my brain to workin', I guess, Doc." He told Baird the summation of all the scattered little remarks that Harry Forrest had left behind. "You know, it would have been plumb easy for Gilbert to have faked that accident business, Doc. Wouldn't it? Them livin' away off to themselves like that. He could have killed the woman and the boy, could have run the team to hell and cut 'em to make 'em look clawed. Then he could have hid the bodies where they wouldn't be discovered. After they was so far gone there was no tellin' what had really happened to 'em, he could pretend to find 'em, and put on his big show of bein' all broke up."

"Sure he could," Baird agreed readily. "And he wouldn't need to be more'n a half-way decent actor to get plumb away with it. But what would he kill them for, Lance?"

Larribee sighed. "Doc, you got me. That's somethin' I ain't figured out yet. Not just to git rid of 'em; it'd have to be a more urgin' reason than that. But suppose Gilbert done that, Doc. And done it so slick that he

skipped outa there with his skirts clean and nobody ever suspectin' him —*all but for one thing.*"

Baird said, "You mean Willy!"

"That's right, Doc. Suppose Gilbert'd had a son of his own, older'n Amos' boy, and that son knowed what Gilbert had done to the woman and Amos' son. Gilbert would have to kill him too, to be safe, wouldn't he? Suppose he thought he *did* kill Willy and left him for dead. And the boy didn't die, but come out of it, and wandered on till he come to a town years later, not rememberin' nothin' of what happened, not knowin' a dang thing but his name."

Baird sucked in his breath. "Holy jumpin' grasshoppers! And Gilbert got wind of it, and come here!"

"That's right, Doc. But to git back to operatin' on Willy. Could it bring his memory back?"

"Once chance in a thousand, Lance. It'd be dangerous. It's be damned costly. It'd need a big specialist."

"Amos and Harry ever talk to you about it? Amos bein' so softhearted about all kids after losin' his own boy, it'd be like him. Suppose Amos and Harry'd made a real strike in one of them old holes, and was willin' to save up the dust to pay for the specialist. You know Harry; he'd of let it slip to somebody. And suppose that somebody repeated it, and it got to Gilbert's ears. He wouldn't be fool enough to hang around here wearin' his own name, Doc."

Baird drew in his breath again, and shook his head. "I'm damned if I see how you figure these things out, Lance. As far as my knowledge goes, you're right on every count. Harry and Amos had been wanting to do something for Willy ever since he showed up here. Amos made a whale of a strike about a year ago. That's one thing Harry never let slip; he didn't know a damned thing about it. Amos never told him, for that very reason; he never told anyone but me."

"He ever git the gold out, Doc?"

"Oh, sure. Easy enough. Nuggets, in two big pockets. Must be worth right around eighty-ninety thousand bucks. I've kept it cached here for Amos, in my little underground vault." Baird grinned. "Amos and I didn't figure nobody'd ever go pokin' around among the dead lookin' for nuggets. Nobody ever has."

"You writ a specialist for Harry and Amos, Doc?"

"Yes. That I did. He stated his price. Then I noticed that the boy was beginnin' to get better by himself, remembering clearer all the time, now and then gettin' flashes of things that happened away back. I advised Amos and Harry to hold off, warned 'em that it would be damned dangerous—the boy might die under the knife. Amos wrote the specialist, and he agreed with me. We decided against the operation. Willy'll be nigh as good as new someday without bein' all cut up."

LARIBEE groaned and got to his feet. "Damn you to hell, Doc! I had a nice neat workout all sewed up, and you shoot it all to hell. Whoever killed Amos and Harry had to have some damn urgin' reason for it, and had to work fast. Gilbert was my baby, there for a few dang sweet minutes. Killin' off the woman and Amos' boy would of been reason for doin' Amos and Harry in."

Baird looked utterly bewildered. "How in hell you figure that?"

"Why, if they was goin' to have the boy operated on and his mind cleared, he'd of remembered Gilbert and told on him, wouldn't he? And if Amos 'n Harry'd made a strike and piled up the stuff, Gilbert could have made a sweet haul to skip the country with, couldn't he? But, hell! Harry couldn't of let that slip, he didn't even know it. The nuggets wasn't cached in Harry's or Amos' cabin where Gilbert could have dug it up; it's safe in the vault with your stiffs. And though Willy's gittin' better all right —I seen that myself—this way it'll take him years afore he remembers everything. And there wasn't even goin' to be no operation. *Hell!*"

Baird laughed in spite of himself. Larribee started stamping toward the door, and Baird said, "Don't take it to heart, Lance."

Larribee growled, "Ah, shut up!"

Baird said, "I'll tell you one thing Amos told me, that sure ties in with your theory, Lance. He never told anybody else, either."

Larribee looked at him quickly, halting half way to the door. "Yeah?"

"If it'll make you feel any better to know you're probably partly right. Amos told me that Gilbert—though he didn't know the name, he just called him that lowdown son—he told me that Gilbert had had the woman's life insured for a steep sum; said he always would believe Gilbert deliberately killed the woman for the insurance, and just didn't want to be bothered with the boy."

Larribee said, "Why, damn your cussed soul. Why didn't you tell me that in the first place, instead of guyin' me and askin' me what he'd of killed 'em for?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, Lance. I never did take any stock in it. I always thought Amos was a little cracked on the subject, and I don't take any stock in it now. The only reason I mentioned it—you looked so down-hearted, I thought it might cheer you up to realize that part of your figurin' could have hit the nail on the head."

Larribee said savagely, "Damn it to hell! *All* of my figurin' *could* hit the nail on the head; I figure plumb logical. Gilbert's still my baby, if I can run him down. Amos and Harry was right across the street yonder when they got into that bust-up over when the sun set. You here then?"

Baird grinned. "I sure was. Watchin' the whole circus. I wouldn't of missed it for money."

"You see anybody else hangin' around takin' it all in?"

"There *wasn't* anybody else around but Don Wharton, and he was nearly scared out of his pants. I thought I'd die laughin' at his expression when —My Gawd Lance! You're thinkin' of Wharton!"

Larribee said sharply, "Don't try to tell me what I'm thinkin', and don't jump to conclusions. Was Don talkin' to Willy any? You hear anything bein' said?"

BAIRD stared, the sudden dawning of a new idea showing in every line of his face. "Jumpin' grasshoppers, Lance; maybe you've got somethin'. Yes, Don was talkin' to Willy. And I could hear most of what he was sayin'. I thought then, and I think now, he was just tryin' to tow Willy away—the fight was scaring Willy—and get the kid's mind on somethin' else. And he succeeded. But if you're thinkin' what I think you're thinkin', nothin' he said to Willy is any good to you."

"Leave me be the judge of that. What was he sayin' to Willy?"

Baird said, "Just tellin' him about a nest of coyote puppies he'd found, promisin' to take him up to see 'em someday. Hell, whyn't you pump Willy?"

"I tried to. Tell Willy anything's a secret, and he'll spill it to the whole town. Tell him that he mustn't repeat a thing for some certain reason, and wild horses couldn't drag it out of him; you know that as well as I do. All I could get out of him was that he couldn't tell who was goin' to show him the puppies, then other people would want to go, too, and they'd scare the puppies away. Might as well talk to a stone wall as quiz Willy after that. I want to ask a favor of you, Doc."

"Just name it, Lance."

"Along about six o'clock, hell, no! Make it five-thirty. He was to meet him there around six. At five-thirty you get hold of Don Wharton, shag him into the *Three Star* if he isn't already there, and buy him the drinks. And don't tell him, nor nobody else, that Amos and Harry is dead."

Baird looked him levelly in the eye, and nodded. "I get you. I'll see that Wharton's in the *Three-Star* from five-thirty on. For how long?"

"Until I come back." Larribee had started out again. He paused in the doorway to finish what he had to say. "No matter what, don't let him git away from you."

Baird smiled grimly. "Don't worry. I'll keep him there if I have to slip some chloral-hydrate into his glass."

Larribee grunted, "Fair enough. Get him there, and see that he stays

put. Be seein' you."

The sheriff left Baird's house behind and went on a little way up the street. The afternoon was waning, the sun lowering. Five-thirty wasn't too far away; Larribee went on until he had a clear view of the *Three Star* entrance doors.

Then he backed out of sight between the trees and set himself to wait. "The red bush," he muttered. "Hell, there's a thousand and one red bushes in the hills. But he'll know what special red bush it is. You can't lose Willy in the woods."

4

THE HANDS of Larribee's watch stood at ten past five, when Willy emerged from the saloon and started up the street. Larribee waited until the boy had passed and was a good block beyond, then stepped out of his retreat and followed. The boy was allowing himself plenty of time to reach the red bush by six o'clock.

Willy went along whistling contentedly. The street was deserted now. It wouldn't have mattered had it been thronged; nobody paid any attention to Willy's rambling about. But Larribee didn't want any one to catch sight of him trailing the boy.

The sheriff ducked into the trees, and forged ahead swiftly on a parallel course till he had left the town behind. The two were traveling due north. The sheriff was safe from all detection from the start, keeping to the vacant side of the town.

Once the last of the buildings, even the scattered houses, were cut off by the thickening forest growth, Larribee stopped, watched Willy swinging along toward him, and waited.

The boy was within a hundred yards of the sheriff before he caught sight of him, and he stopped short, looking a little dismayed.

Larribee called to him, "It's all right, Willy! I just happened to be out this way, saw you comin', and thought I'd wait for you. You goin' to see the coyote puppies now?"

Willy nodded, advancing slowly until he reached Larribee. He said anxiously, "You sure you won't scare 'em?"

"I give you my word, I sure won't. Come along, let's get to that red bush." The boy fell into step with him, still a trifle reluctant and dubious about Larribee's presence, and the sheriff added, "If they're little enough, we might take one home with us for a pet. You reckon you'd like that?"

Willy beamed; on the instant his last shred of objection scattered to the winds. "Hell, yes! I'd like that swell. Can you tame 'em?"

"Oh, sure. If you git 'em young enough. They ain't nothin' but wild dogs, you know. Can you see the red bush yit?"

Willy swept a glance over the terrane ahead. They were well over a mile from town, now. They were traveling up a kind of swale that was rapidly turning into the bed of a shallow gulch where the slopes began to rise on either hand.

Willy said excitedly, "Yeah! I see it. There's lots of red bushes, but you couldn't mistake this one. It's growin' in front of a boulder big as a house. Up there. See it?"

Larribee looked up the slope where the boy pointed. Given the rock for landmark, nobody could go wrong about the exact red bush indicated. It was perhaps sixty feet above the gulch bed, on the western slope. Larribee stood and stared at it intently. It looked innocent enough.

He glanced down at Willy. "You stay right here, and I'll go up and see if they're there. If they are, I'll call you and you can come up."

Willy protested vehemently. "But I want to go along; I want to see the puppies. You said I could have one."

Larribee said, "You'll see 'em, if they're there, son. You'll have one, if they're little enough. But the mother coyote might be hangin' around, too. She could might nigh claw you and bite you to death, if she got you down. I'm pretty tough. She couldn't hurt me much. You wait here. I find

the old she coyote up there, I'll scare her away so it's safe for you to come."

Willy's face cleared. "Oh! I never thought about that. Sure. I'll wait. You be careful she don't jump you."

"I will. You jest be patient and hold everything for a few minutes."

LARRIBEE went lunging up the slope, quartering off to the side, his gaze intent on the red bush, watching sharply for the first sign of the trap. The trap would be there; there could be no doubt about that. And it wouldn't be roughly set; Willy knew the woods too well to be ensnared by anything crude.

Within a few yards of the bush and the rock, still keeping well to the side, Larribee stopped and surveyed the set-up almost inch by inch.

The red bush was not directly in front of the rock. A good fifteen feet of space intervened. Other trees and bushes massed close beyond the little clear space and the big rock. The ground of the slope was abruptly steeper for several feet just below the red bush. All around, on every plane or sloping surface, the earth was covered by a thick mat of fallen yellowing and reddened leaves.

That was all. The entire layout looked utterly innocent of all hidden danger. The coyote puppies were there, four of them, tiny things no more than a few days or a week old. They were in a leafy depression at the base of the big rock, directly across the clear space from the red bush.

Anyone, to get at the puppies, would have to cross the clear space between the red bush and the rock. There was no other way to reach them. Larribee stared at the leaf-matted space till his eyes ached.

Then he saw it. A little cluster of green leaves with their edges beginning to curl under the red and yellow ones.

He whirled, clawed around under the trees until he found a long tough branch, broke it off and stripped it of twigs. He sidled close to the cleared space, and began using the branch to sweep the leaves.

It didn't take him long. Under the red and yellow leaves were numerous boughs with bunches of withering green leaves still adhering. The boughs were laced together lightly, but carefully. Larribee eyed them grimly. They wouldn't hold up the weight of a wild rabbit. He seized the butt end of the nearest bough and hauled it away. The whole structure gave and came with it.

The boughs had been neatly tied with strong bonds so they couldn't be disturbed by any stray animal. Larribee peered down the uncovered hole. It was a good eight feet across. It was probably two hundred feet deep.

He turned and called down to the boy. "All right, Willy. Come on up. They're here, and they're little enough to take. The old she coyote don't seem to be around nowhere."

As Willy came racing toward him, he added warningly, "Be careful! That sudden slope there is an old mine dump, so dang overgrowed you'd never recognize it if you wa'nt lookin'. Come around this way and hang onto me. Don't stumble into that old mine shaft; you'd sure be a goner if you did."

* * *

They came back into the town a little while after sunset. The afterglow was still in the sky as they walked into the *Three Star* side by side, Willy cradling the tiny coyote pup in his arms.

Half the men in town were gathered in the room, most of them at the bar. Baird had Wharton close to the nigh end of the bar, the doctor was still plenty sober, but Wharton already had more than he could carry.

Larribee laid a hand on Willy's shoulder, and halted him a good way back from the bar. Several of the men turned to look, and Baird winked at the sheriff and gestured meaningly with his head toward the owlish-eyed Wharton.

LARRIBEE said, "Gentlemen, I'd admire to have you give me your attention please." All talking stopped, and Larribee had instantly the undivided attention he'd requested. "I got

to make a pretty sad announcement. I got to tell you that Amos Kittridge is dead, shot by that gun of Harry's with the silencer on it. Harry Forrest is dead, too; beat to death by his own spade. Doc Baird can verify me; he's got 'em laid out in his back room."

Baird said quietly, "Yes, that's right; I've got 'em laid out for burial."

Larribee said, "It begins with Amos' wife, and the fella she run off with." He went on, repeating the whole of the theory he had figured out when he was talking with Baird. "Only, it's more'n a theory, you see, gentlemen. He was goin' to be exposed sure. Harry and Amos stirred the whole thing up, startin' the talk about operatin' on the boy. The killer had to git rid of 'em fast; and he had to git rid of the boy. Gentlemen, what would you fellers do with a man that lured Willy into the woods to find some coyote puppies? And had a old mine shaft covered up for the boy to fall into? He'd failed to git the boy once, he was goin' to make sure Willy didn't git up and walk away this time."

Dick Hammond stared at the puppy in Willy's arms. "And somebody in this room tried to pull that, Lance?"

"Sure did, Dick."

Baird moved a little closer to Don Wharton.

Joe Beldon said, "Show us the man. We won't leave one inch of him hangin' onto the other."

Larribee said, "Then grab Doc Baird, and hold him! Hold him, I said! Just grab him and hold on; that's all. Hold your tempers, too; I got more to say."

Baird turned white, as a dozen hands seized him so quickly he had no chance to move at all. He gulped and swallowed, but he made no attempt to speak.

Larribee looked him up and down contemptuously. "Sorry I had to kind of flim-flam you about that sunset business, and one thing and another, Doc. Made me look plumb foolish now and ag'in, I reckon. But I had to make you think I was clear off the track, and hadn't even got a smell of your trail. Because I had a lot of figurin' out to do, and I needed your cooperation."

He looked at the other men, his hand still on Willy's shoulder. "You see, I was plump suspicious of Doc right from the start. You was all supposed to think that Harry and Amos killed each other, and it could of been explained that way. Though I won't take the time for it now. But I knowed that quarrel about the sunset didn't mean nothin': Harry and Amos been squabblin' about triflin' matters since Heck was a pup. Doc was the only man livin' right there across from Harry; outside of Don and Willy, he was the only one could have heard the quarrel and knowed what it was about, and was handy to kill 'em right then and make it look like the result of the quarrel. But I couldn't figure what he'd do it for. I had to do some snoopin'."

Baird said scathingly, "Why, you—"

LARRIBEE interrupted the fluent cursing. "Shut up! Listen to me, Doc. You talk, or I'll turn you over to the boys, and I don't give a hang what they do to you. You talk, and I'll do my best to see you git life instead of the noose, and I reckon I can do it. You don't deserve it, Mr. Gilbert—might's well call you by your name now we know what 'tis—but I'll keep my word. While you was gone after Amos, I sneaked into your office and prowled around, and I found that letter from the specialist which come yesterday. Didn't shed much light, till I got down to some heavy thinkin'."

He spoke to the other men again, in an explanatory aside. "Letter said as how Amos was worried, Doc Baird bein' all for the operation again. Warned Baird not to consider it none, was a long chance of bein' successful and a good chance Willy might die. But—if Doc had been takin' that tack, there wouldn't of been no blow-up, no need for fast action."

He said to Baird, "'Twas 'tother way about from what you told me, wa'nt it? The specialist advised ag'in the operation, but you lied to Amos and Harry. You was all for it, and

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Guns For A Gambler

Complete Powdersmoke Novelet

by T. W. FORD

(Author of "Bleeding Gold")

They called him Gambler Johnny, this pitiful little man who took insults and blows meekly. Yet, there was fire burning beneath his calm exterior, and memories of the days when he had been a commanding figure. And indignation against the rotten deal he knew was coming up finally made him reveal his true self . . .

THE STOCKY man with the projecting lower lip hammered angrily with a fist on the bar top. "Come on, Gambler! Shake your britches! We want some drinks." He bawled it at a small, slender man with a wasp waist girded by a flour-sack apron. The latter stood staring out the window at the sun-beaten main street with a dreamy air. "Wake up, Gambler, dang it! You want I should wake you with a little lead, huh?" He dropped a hand suggestively to one of the ivory butts of the guns that sagged at his waist, and tacked on an oath reflecting on the drink-wrangler's parentage.

The Gambler came around swiftly, silently, spinning on a runover boot-heel, yet without seeming to move fast. He held spectacles in his left hand and his right was suddenly flat against his thigh, though he wore no shooting iron. For a moment his small blue eyes were no longer tired, had lost their meek look; the habitual stamp of discouragement was washed from his flat-jawed pale face below the cap of uncombed blue-black hair. The look on him, something about him, made the man outside the bar clamp a hand on that gun butt, really.

Then the barkeep known as the Gambler, Gambler Johnny, donned his spectacles and the mask of inoffensiveness settled back over his face. "Sorry, Mr. Jonas, sorry. Reckon I must've been thinking of something," the Gambler said in that low, deep voice so strange in such a small man. His body, which had gone as stiff and straight as a slim sword blade at that obscene oath, relaxed; he moved down behind the bar counter in his old squeaky boots, yet with a kind of gliding grace. Took the four shot glasses Jonas shoved across.

"Fill 'em up and bring 'em over, Two-Bit," Jonas said, sneering at the other's beard-stubbled face, at the soiled sweat-stained white shirt. Jonas himself was always duded up, favoring cream-hued sombreros and fancy silk shirts and fringed white buckskin gloves. He was the segundo of Dal Sebon's Running-S outfit, though he never appeared to work at it much; he was always where the handsome Sebon himself was. Some folks called Jonas a bodyguard, Sebon's fifth ace in the hole; there were whispered hints he'd been a gun passer in the days before Cholla Center knew him.

Gambler Johnny filled the glasses, put them on a tray, and took them obsequiously to the table across the barroom where the quartet sat in the somnolent afternoon. There was the slightyly hunch-backed Hank Rasher who had a rundown hay and feed store. Who didn't work in it much at all but always seemed to have plenty of dinero. There was a stranger in town, a gent the Gambler heard them call Texas, a tall splinter of an hom-

Gambler Johnny was shooting it out, now, as of old . . .

bre toting tied-down hoglegs. He had an ever-reappearing catlike grin. Since he'd been there, no customer had more than barely pushed the batwing doors inward before his slate-hued eyes slid that way. And there was Dal Sebon himself, tall, powerful, big-shouldered, a tiger of a figure, confident of his strength and his good looks. He lounged indolently, occasionally fingering one of his long sideburns, tawny-eyed with a handsome acquiline nose. The dance-hall girls always fluttered around when he went into one of the cowtown's honky tonks, but his red-lipped mouth was the mouth of a man who would enjoy cruelty. And there was Jonas, of course.

"Well, how's the old Gambler?" Sebon sang out as the barkeep set out the drinks. Sebon had a lazy patronizing voice. "You look a mite bogged, down, Gambler; bet you was out running after fillies all night, huh?" He guffawed and the others chimed in. He gave the slim Gambler a playful shove that almost upset him, then

produced a silver dollar. "Fer Gawd's sake, buy yourself a clean shirt, Gambler; you stink like a skunk's boudoir!"

JUST AS the meek Gambler put out a hand for it, Sebon let it drop into the spittoon standing beside the table. The Gambler put on a sickly grin, then took up the spittoon and took it back behind the bar with him. The Lord knows that when a man needed dinero for what he did, he'd crawl for it. But he'd turned so gray he looked aged, though he was still shy of thirty.

The one called Texas was saying over at the table, "Hearing you call him the Gambler reminds me of a cardman I used to see in a pueblo down on the Rio few years back. Gambler Banfors, he was. What a dude and a devil he was—stopped a stud game one night with thousands on the table while he changed to a fresh shirt, 'cause he got a spot on the cuff. Weren't afraid of the devil himself, neither."

He paused to light up one of those skinny brown paper cigarets he had constantly in his knife-thin lips. "I was there the night one of the toughest gunslingers in those parts called him a cheat and swung a gun on him. This Banfors ripped a .32 from a shoulder sling and broke that jasper's shooting arm afore he could spit.... A dude and a devil!"

"Well, that ain't our Gambler!" guffawed Sebon. "This poor little pack rat, he—"

Two men entered through the batwings with purposeful swiftness. The front one was little, middle-aged fierce-eyed Asa Pomm, cow king of the Cholla country. He was a proud man, the kind of an hombre nobody ever dared get familiar with, always garbed in dull gray with a black bow tie over a spotless white shirt when he came to town. Behind him followed a man known as Garson, a rider who'd joined the Pomm outfit a few months back. He was bigger than his boss but bony-faced, too; and Garson walked with the same quick nervous stride; he was always with Asa Pomm when the cow baron came to town. Garson's prematurely pure white hair showed below his sombrero.

Pomm walked down the middle of the room, then faced Sebon and the other three at the table. Sebon nodded lazily, sombrero pushed back, said, "Howdy, Pomm."

Pomm stood with hands on hips and crackled, "*Mister* Pomm, to you.... Sebon, I'm warning you: stay away from my daughter, Augusta! *Sabe?* I don't want her seeing the likes of you, don't aim to have her wasting her time on a skirt-chasing fool who's locoed over his own good looks!"

Listening, the little Gambler got ready to duck down behind the bar. It looked like a bad moment. Jonas, Sebon's segundo, had half-risen from his chair that was backed against the side wall; the hombre known as Texas had dropped his hands under the table. But Sebon gave with a silent laugh, teeth baring an instant, then put on a look of mock hurt.

"I'm right sorry to hear you feel that way, Mr. Pomm," he said without rancor. "She's a mighty fine girl. The kind of a miss I'd like to marry and settle down with." He shook his head sadly. "The right kind of a girl, Mr. Pomm, can change a man's whole—"

"Stop giving me that slick-as-slobbers empty mouthing, Sebon," little bristling Asa Pomm snapped. "I'm telling you to stay the other side of the fence; she ain't for the likes of you. Them's orders!"

Sebon said low-voiced, "But if she was willing and ready to marry me, Mr. Pomm...."

Pomm's lips curled as he turned red with locked-in fury. "If she ever got hitched with your breed, Sebon, I'd—I'd disinherit her. Stay—away—from—Augusta." He stared several seconds, then turned and stalked out with Garson trailing him.

The man called Texas had his eyes locked on the taller Garson as if fascinated by something about him. Then Texas slipped silently out the side door into the alley, and Dal Sebon, shedding the mask of meekness, came out of his chair like a snake, eyes a-blaze, to throw low-voiced oaths after the departing cow king. "He

ain't a-going to get away with that kind of talk to me, by grab!" he whispered venomously. "He ain't a-going to get away with it...."

DOWN AT the end of the back bar counter, the barkeep known as the Gambler riffled a deck of cards with eye-defying rapidity. He shuffled, cut, recut with an easy yet dazzling speed. The place was empty now; Sebon and his party had left. The gambler dealt out four hands to imaginary players. The cards flipped through the air, falling in four precise stacks, his long well-shaped fingers not seeming to actually touch them yet controlling them. His pale hands were absolutely spotless, the nails perfectly trimmed, cleaned. Even though he mightn't shave for days, would wear a dirty shirt, Gambler Johnny always kept his hands that way. They represented the last bit of pride and self respect left him.

Suddenly the remainder of the deck slipped from the left one and his fingers clawed, the hands shaking, in a gesture of fierce frustration. The little blue eyes grew misty; his mouth twisted. He'd fallen a long long way, just one step short of the gutter, his thoughts went. With loathing he looked along the bar, at the dirty glasses to be washed, the floor that was supposed to be mopped up before the evening's business got under way. Working as a drink wrangler for Big Belly Martin, owner of the *Wagon Wheel Bar and Gambling Hall,* a man was one step above a swamper. And maybe one degree lower than a monte dealer, who was usually rated as half a jump ahead of a horsethief.

When he'd first come to work here, a silent frozen-faced man obviously with something locked inside him, it had been as a gambler, a card dealer. His eyes strayed to the green baize card tables in the back of the place. He'd been an ace-high dealer, an extraordinary clever man with the cards. Folks had wondered why a gambler so good condescended to work at a cheap joint like Big Belly's place.

THERE HAD been two things wrong with Gambler Johnny in Big Belly's estimation. One was that he dealt them straight, refused to cheat, though in fun he could burn a card off the bottom so that nobody could detect him. The other thing was that the Gambler refused to clean a man; when a player was down to his last few chips, or dollars, the Gambler'd refuse to play any more against him. The avaricious Big Belly had railed at him for it, threatened to fire him. "He'll go somewhere else and lose it, you fool!" he'd ranted at Gambler Johnny afterward.

The Gambler had shrugged in his neat-fitting gray frock coat. "Let him.... But I don't aim to have it on my conscience."

Then he'd taken to periods of drinking. He'd just sit in his room upstairs, a bottle of forty-rod whisky beside him, like a man clubbed into a stupor. Staring with haunted hollow eyes, staring back into the past. He wouldn't be able to come downstairs and deal them sometimes for a night, or even two nights, in a row. Big Belly himself had had to deal them. And that drinking had finally given the ruthless glassy-eyed proprietor his chance to cut down this fastidious little man who'd always treated him so coldly, so condescendingly.

Gambler Johnny had been unable to work so many nights, Martin told him, that he actually owed dinero against his salary. And Martin didn't want him to deal for him any more; Johnny was too soft-hearted. So, therefore, the only way he could work it off was behind the bar; that was how he'd become a bartender, Gambler Johnny realized.

He stared at the cards he'd dealt out, clamped his eyes shut against the sight of them. Then he heard the creak of the batwings, footsteps entering the place. "I've got to pay," he muttered to himself before he turned around. "It's the price... I've got to pay for what I've done... I've got to pay." He pivoted and moved down behind the counter with that subservient smile.

It was a tall man with the coffin-

like face in the long rusty black coat; he was a stranger to Cholla Center, had been in town a couple of days, staying down at the Travellers House. Nobody knew why he was around; he slapped a silver dollar on the bar and Gambler Johnny set him up a drink. The coffin-faced man—his name was Hauser, according to the clerk down at the hotel—took a swig, seemed to be looking at nothing with his smoky black eyes. Then the Gambler realized they were focussed on his white long-fingered hands. The Gambler picked up the bar rag and began to swab around the back bar.

"Glad to see you're doing something, daggone it!" It was Big Belly Martin, the boss, who'd come down the stairs from his room above, come noiselessly in those slippers he wore till the real night business started and he donned his boots. He had foot trouble. He gave a big warm grin to the stranger in the black coat; after all, the man was a paying customer. "Gambler, I'll take over the bar. I want you to go on an errand for me." Martin yawned. He slept most of the day and stayed up all night. "Here."

Martin extended an envelope to Gambler Johnny; there was a note inside it. "Take this over to the *Gold Strike* and give it to Gladys." Martin rubbed his huge belly, then felt his jowls to appreciate the shave he'd just given himself, finally ran a hand over his thinning greased-back black hair.

"I'll have another drink," said the man in the rusty black coat.

The boss said he'd take care of him. "Take that message, Gambler, and make it fast."

GAMBLER Johnny murmured something and got an old battered Stetson from the hook at the end of the bar and went out the back door of the place. He knew a short cut. It was a relief to get out of the place, anyway; there was something about the hombre in the long black coat that smelled of lawman. He got over to the *Gold Strike* up on the side street, found the brassy-haired Gladys that the boss was struck with at the moment. He gave her the note, then started back for the *Wagon Wheel*, but in no hurry to get there.

He meandered down the side street, took the lane that ran behind the hotel, the Travellers House. That was where Asa Pomm stayed when he was in town for any length of time. And Pomm, as Johnny knew from hearsay at the bar, had been in town a day and a half waiting the arrival of a cattle buyer from a Kansas City meat-packing house; the flood over in the Skollone Hills that had washed out the bridge over the creek, had held up the stagecoach.

"He'd be a tough man to gamble against," Gambler Johnny said half aloud. Then he heard something that wasn't the wind in the grass beside the horse-shed in the rear of the hotel; and he saw them, Augusta Pomm, Asa Pomm's daughter, and Sebon, tall and handsome in the dusk.

The Gambler stopped in his tracks and watched them. They were standing close together, talking in the settling shadows. There was a low laugh, Sebon's laugh. Augusta drew back a step; Johnny could see her very plainly, outlined against the white-washed stone rear of the hotel. She was small, a fragile thing in her white dress against the big Sebon. Red-haired, the tresses hanging to her shoulders; high-bosomed and tapering to a tiny waist, her gray eyes flashing with emotion when she turned her head away from Sebon. Suddenly, Gambler Johnny wanted to kill the man.

He'd seen Augusta Pomm before in town, from a distance, always admired her—and something more than admired her. Once she'd come out of a store, started to cross the street when a drunk had blocked her way. Gambler Johnny had fended him out of the way and escorted her across the muddy road. When she'd thanked him, she'd called him "Gambler Johnny." And it was the first time he'd known she knew who he was; he'd never forgotten that time.

Then he saw Dal Sebon pull her to him roughly. She put up her hands

to fend him off, and next her arms went limp. Sebon was kissing her, kissing her hard on that bright red mouth that Gambler Johnny had never forgotten. Sebon finally released her, and she ran to the rear door of the hotel.

GAMBLER Johnny moved on, returned to Big Belly's place and took up his duties behind the bar. It was still too early for the night crowd though a couple of cowhands were sipping beer; old man Tesser, hobbling on his cane, came in for his before-dinner drink. Martin came behind the bar and poured himself a big shot before going up to his room to doze before the night's gambling started. Then the man known as Texas and Dal Sebon walked in together, Jonas trailing behind; they were hardly there when Hank Rasher hurried in and joined them. Somehow, to the Gambler, it seemed like a gathering of buzzards. He pushed a bottle over the bar.

They poured drinks and Texas began to talk rapidly, in a low voice. The Gambler could hear, even as he pretended to be busied at something, but nobody ever paid any attention to the little pack rat who once dealt cards there anyway.

Texas said: "Moment I slapped my eyes on that Garson, I knew I'd seen him afore—even though he'd shaved off his mustache. I saw the way he nibbled at his lip, looking at our drinks while that Pomm told you off, Sebon."

"Told me off, that danged—"

"Listen," said Texas. "I went out the side door and followed 'em back to a little bar at the other end of the town. I traipsed in casual-like and bought a drink, standing near to him at the end of the bar. I got a good look at his bad teeth and knew then I wasn't wrong. I got a great memory for little details like that an'—"

"Where'd you seen him before?" demanded Sebon impatiently.

"Gunstock Forks.... Only I can't recollect what handle he was using in that pueblo over there by the state line; he was in jail for shooting a man, a man name of Kirby. It was a plain man-to-man fair draw fight, but this Kirby had a heap of relatives and friends in that town—including the sheriff, who was his cousin. They threw this—uh—Garson into jail, and that night a lynch mob hit the jail. In all the excitement, Garson slipped out and made his escape. Got clean away. Garson." He picked up his drink.

SEBON SPAT on the floor. "Texas, you said you had something big to tell me. What the devil good's that? You cain't even remember the name he used in that Gunstock place."

"Not so fast," said Texas, a nasty note in his voice. "I said I got drinking with him a while ago at the other end of town. Garson—as he calls himself—likes the redeye. A heap. I bought a few drinks, then I sprang it on him when he was some orey-eyed. Said I thought I'd met him before. In Gunstock Forks, mebbe it was, I said." Texas broke off a moment to fire up one of those brown paper cigarets.

"He went white, said I was locoed. Got all excited."

"Yes. Well?" said Sebon shortly.

"Said I was mistaken. I sorta hinted he was using a different name then. He said I was crazy again. Then—he slipped, said he could prove it. Said his brother was the biggest man in the valley and would back him up. He used these words. He said, 'What Asa says around here is taken for gospel truth. And—' Then he choked off like he'd lost his voice. Sabe?"

Sebon galvanized so suddenly he knocked over his glass. The Gambler refilled it as if he were unaware of anything that had been said.

"I savvy," he said softly. "Garson is Asa Pomm's own brother.... No wonder he's always with him when he comes into town.... And he's a wanted killer, by grab." He stared down hard at the bar, handsome face taut, for some time. Drank his drink and stared some more.

Then he looked up. "Texas, I'm glad I hired you—right glad. I've got

plans.... Gambler, we got some business to transact. Bring a bottle and some glasses into the private room." He led the way down to the back end of the bar and turned right into the little room off to one side of it.

The Gambler obediently brought in a bottle and some glasses, set them on the table there, face a mask of meekness. But when he emerged and saw that no other customers had come in, he was glad; he moved down along the back counter to that mail order company's calendar that hung there, slid it aside softly. Behind it was bored a hole that looked into the private room. Big Belly always liked to know what was going on in there; it had made him a little unexpected dinero on a few occasions.

The Gambler had a limited view of the four of them sitting in there. But he wasn't interested in seeing; he wanted to hear. He turned his head sideways. Sebon was saying:

"—and she's a pretty enough filly, that Augusta. But women come a dime a dozen for me. Sure.... I'd marry her to get Pomm's outfit. He ain't young, exactly. And—well, accidents can happen to a man. Like a drygulcher's shot when he's riding a lonely piece of fenceline."

"Asa said he'd cut her off if she hitches with you," Rasher reminded Sebon.

Sebon cursed but not angrily. "Not now—he won't—with him hiding out his brother as a cowhand—a man that's wanted by the Law. I got a plan." He swigged a drink so fast he coughed a moment. "Look. We pass Asa Pomm the word—indirectly of course—that they's going to be a rustling raid on his place tonight—by that Joe Longo's outfit that was seen up in the foothills a week ago. He'll bust the breeze to git back home pronto. But we gotta keep this Garson—his brother—in town. See that he's plumb orey eyed. Then we tie the deadwood on him in a shooting mess, see that the town marshal grabs him. He's jailed—and me, I got Asa Pomm right where I want him."

"I don't savvy it, boss," said Jonas heavily.

Sebon snorted. "Simple.... After we fix Garson, I take Augusta over the county line and marry her. She'll come with me, all right; she's plumb locoed about me. Sure.... Then we'll come back. And Asa won't disinherit her, 'cause I'll tell him we know that his brother in jail—of course he'll be able to whip the charge in the end—is wanted in Gunstock Forks for a killing. Asa'll accept me as his son-in-law to buy my silence."

There was nothing said in the private room for some moments. Then the Gambler, listening through the little hole, heard Texas hit the table with his flat hand. "That's a right smart idee," he said.

"Sure—it's mine," agreed Sebon. "Rasher—Texas—git out and find that Garson. Keep him drinking; git him blind orey-eyed. I know the gent to git to slip the word to Pomm his place is going to be raided. And a little after midnight, we'll pull the fake shooting involving Asa's brother. But we got to work real fast.... One more drink."

The Gambler, hands shaking, let the calendar slide back over the hole in the wall as Big Belly Martin, booted now, came down the stairs from above. Sebon led his party out, throwing a bill on the bar. Excited, Gambler Johnny pulled off his flour sack apron. "Boss," he told Big Belly, "I just got word. A friend of mine is real sick. I—I got to see him pronto. I'll be back in an hour—maybe less. But I gotta go and—"

"Like hell! Business'll be starting big soon. You dirty drunk, if I let you out I probably wouldn't see you again tonight. Pick up that apron and—" When the almost frantic gambler tried to dodge past him, the massive Big Belly fetched him a clout over one ear. A deep laugh rumbled out of him as the Gambler sagged to a knee. Then Martin really began to beat him, striking him with fisted hands, grinning as he saw the blood start from the little man's mouth. It gave him great satisfaction to hammer down the Gambler who'd always seemed to think himself so superior. He remembered the time he'd seen him writing a letter in his room, writ-

ing easily, quickly, with that flowing hand. Big Belly couldn't sign his own name. He kept striking....

WHEN Gambler Johnny came to, he found himself flung half on, half off his rude cot in the little cook shack that jutted from the back of the barroom-gambling hall. He stood up and almost collapsed, brain fogged. He glimpsed himself in the cracked piece of mirror hung over the cot and recoiled. Big Belly had *really* slammed him around. Automatically he pried aside a loose board beneath the bed and brought out the bottle he had hidden there; after a deep slug, his head began to clear slowly.

It came to Gambler why Big Belly had beaten him—because he wanted to take a little time off. He took another drink, then remembered about the conversation he'd overheard in the private room. Asa Pomm had to be warned.

At the water bucket, he doused his face and wiped off the blood smears with a kitchen rag, then slipped out the back door even as he heard Big Belly's booming laugh through the sounds of business from the front of the place. Some time must have passed, he realized; hurriedly he cut across back lots till he quartered around and got down to the main drag by the livery barn alley. He half ran along to the *Travellers House*.

The clerk at the desk eyed him suspiciously when he asked for Asa Pomm but told him the cow king had left. Said he'd had his horse sent around. But that he'd said something about stopping at Peabody's place. Peabody was the town undertaker and coffin maker; he and Pomm were old friends. The Gambler ran up a side street, dizzy from the beating he'd taken, to the little place where Peabody lived. The elderly man had retired for the night. But at the Gambler's insistent hammering, he finally came to the door in his night shirt.

"Pomm left here nigh an hour ago—headed home, you drunken coot," he told the Gambler angrily. "What business he'd have with you I don't know anyway.... Yes, he was riding alone." Then Peabody slammed the door.

The Gambler stood there in the chill night wind. That meant Asa Pomm had left his daughter, Augusta, behind at the hotel; that he'd been duped by the word Sebon had sent him indirectly about a raid on his ranch. The Gambler's legs carried him along slowly. He found himself outside the cook shack back at Big Belly's place. Inside he dug out the bottle and took another drink, sitting on the edge of his unmade cot, thinking, thinking.

GAMBLER Johnny never did know exactly when the decision galvanized inside him. He found himself stripped to the waist, shaving with tepid water before the cracked piece of mirror. Then he'd opened up the battered little trunk he'd brought with him when he first came to Cholla Center on the stage coach. He brought out a spotless gray frock coat, the one he used to wear when he dealt the cards. A pair of custom-made boots with silver inlay in the toes. A white beruffled shirt. A stove pipe hat. And finally three guns, a short-barrelled .32 with a shoulder rig and a gunbelt with its holsters bearing a pair of horn-handled .45's with his monogram cut in the butts.

He donned all those things, and when he had them on, he looked like a different man. It was more than just the rig. He stood as straight and slender as a blade. The obsequious pose was erased; the little blue eyes were cold and masked, no more reflecting the humble smile. He was the Gambler again.

"The best damn man who ever dealt 'em," he murmurred, studying himself in the *mirror*. "And the fastest hands—at *anything*. And—" He heard Big Belly's heavy stride approaching the cook shack and slipped out the door into the night. But out there fear, the realization of what he had become, froze him in his tracks a minute. Then he whispered on the night, "I got to pay back—pay back for one life I blasted.... Maybe this is the way—

by stopping another life from being ruined." And he moved on.

He went from barroom to barroom, from honky tonk to honky tonk in sprawling Cholla Center, seeking out Dal Sebon or the man known as Garson who was actually Asa Pomm's brother. The night was growing older; then, down in a little jammed place beside the stage depot, he saw Rasher, the hay and feed store man. Rasher was with limping Tom Ebrow, the town drunkard, buying the saloon rat drinks. But there was no sign of Sebon or Texas or of Sebon's shadow, Jonas. The Gambler kept making the rounds, but in vain.

He was just coming down a side road at the edge of the town when he saw a dim light in Chinee Jim's eating place. The Gambler peered through a crack in the drawn shutters. They were there, Sebon. Jonas. The splinter of a man who was Texas. And Garson, Asa Pomm's brother wanted for a shooting at Gunstock Forks. The latter's head sagged, wagging at the jug of redeye on the table.

Even as the Gambler peered, Sebon slapped Garson several times to straighten him up, then they helped him from the chair, half carrying him. They went through a door in the rear into the kitchen. The door closed after them. The Gambler darted around to the side of the place and down along it. In the darkness, he struck a pile of tin cans and tumbled headlong. He lay stunned for several moments. When he picked himself up and got around to the rear, they had gone. Chinee Jim faded back from the open door, shut it, slid the bar behind it; the Gambler listened but could hear nothing on the night save the din from the places along the main line.

PANIC gripped the Gambler for some moments. They were about to make their play, and he didn't know where. Then he remembered Rasher with Tom Ebrow, the drunkard, and it came to him. Ebrow was going to be the target, the dupe, the man supposedly shot up by Asa Pomm's brother. Back on the side street, slim Gambler Johnny, grasping his stovepipe hat, began to run again. He got down near that place beside the stage depot where he'd seen Rasher before. The lights of the place were out. Then, across the lane, under the trees, he saw Rasher steering the drunkard along.

Suddenly calm, as deadly cold as when he dealt himself the final card with everything in a jackpot on a baize-topped table, he fell in behind them. Silently he dogged Rasher and his dupe as they worked up to the main line, turned along it, then went into a side street opposite. They were nearing the alley leading to the setback livery barn. At the head of it, they paused. There was a low whistle. Repeated. The Gambler knew it was a signal.

"Now!" bit off Rasher. And, gun whipped out, he shoved the helpless Ebrow into the dim alley, strode after him, his gun lifted, poised to bat the drunkard over the head. The Gambler slid into the alley.

Moonlight seeping through the foliage of the trees threw a freckled pattern of light on the ground. And from the other end, up near the barn itself, came a trio of men. In front, swaying on drink sodden legs, was Garson, Pomm's brother. Behind him were Texas and Sebon in his creamhued sombrero. The setup was plain; this was to frame Asa Pomm's brother into a shooting.

Rasher's gun stabbed muzzle flame skyward abruptly. Ebrow started to come around, wondering what was happening, pawing at the air. And Rasher started to bring the still smoking barrel down across his head. Only it never reached its target; for, gliding up behind him, whisking out one of those .45's with the same dexterous grace with which he handled cards, Gambler Johnny cracked Rasher over the skull first.

As the latter sank, the Gambler yelled out, tried to stop those coming from the other end. But his words were chewed up in the smash of gun reports. From beside Garson, Sebon and Texas triggered lead into Ebrow. He crumpled with smashed legs; then,

halfway down, he lifted a little, back arched with agony as a slug found his chest. They were playing it viciously, and the Gambler, having been behind the now mortally wounded Ebrow, was left exposed. A wild slug drilled his stovepipe hat. As he flung himself sideward with a catlike grace, it toppled off; Sebon, amazed, bellowed an oath, then triggered again.

GAMBLER Johnny's weapons—he'd snaked out the second .45—were singing their savage tune, now; lead plucked at a sleeve of his gray frock coat with the tails. He was slaunchwise in the crouch of the professional gunman. Poised. His .45's frothed yellow. The man known as Texas reeled and went staggering over against the fence at one side of the alley. But the Gambler's right gun dropped from his hand as the bullet that had punched him in the right arm sent him spinning half around.

He twisted back to deal lead to Sebon; then Sebon's shadow, Jonas, came jumping out of the high grass at the other side of the alley. Shooting as he lunged into sight beside the form of Garson who'd fallen down in his drunken daze.

Gambler Johnny was a cardman; he knew how, when the odds were stacked against him, to play them close to his chest. His single gun snapping once again, he glided backward out of the alley, right side sagging with the pain of that broken arm. They came after him; they had to because he was a witness to what had been attempted.

"It's the Gambler!" bawled Jonas.

Gambler Johnny made his mistake then. Ducking away from the alley opening, he backed up the side road toward the edge of the town, away from the main line. The other two slid out into the shadows of the road. The Gambler, holding his fire, darted sideways as if to get behind the corner of a pole-log cabin at one side. Then he dropped to one knee suddenly, levelled carefully, and let burly Jonas have it as he rushed in. He caught him once in the belly, with a second shot in the neck. Jonas went up on his boot toes, then jack-knifed over as if he'd been kicked in the abdomen; already half dead, he hit the dust of the road with the top of his head as he went down.

Dal Sebon had slid behind a tree, rode the trigger. Shifting, the Gambler tried to hit his exposed shoulder, but the Gambler's .45 clicked hollowly on an empty shell. An instant later, one of Sebon's slugs nicked him along the side of the head just over the ear. He was stunned a moment, then felt the hot blood pouring down the side of his face. He was terribly weak but his brain cleared. There was that .32 in his shoulder rig, but he knew if he stayed erect till he was able to draw, he'd be ventilated, given a grazing permit in Hell's own pasture. He threw himself flat, left arm under his chest, too weak to drag that shoulder gun yet.

Sebon came ten feet out from the tree, sized up the blood running from the side of Gambler Johnny's head, then wheeled and legged it down to the main drag. The Gambler came up on an elbow, to his knees. It had to be to a finish now, he knew, or the dead in the alley would be laid to him. In the moonlight down at the corner, he saw Sebon turn up toward the hotel. And then he sensed it.

GAMBLER GOT to his feet, wavered a moment, then went after Sebon. Men were pouring out of the barrooms when he rounded the corner. He barely saw them, so intent he was on tracking down Dal Sebon. He forgot about his bullet-smashed arm, the fact that he had thrown away the empty gun in his left hand, he just kept running down toward the hotel.

He saw two saddled ponies standing at the hitch rack, saw the slim Augusta, in a riding habit, standing on the steps of the hotel, watching Sebon with a fascinated stare as he ran toward her. Sebon yelled something and she moved down the steps toward the horses. Sebon showed his stripe then; he ran to the dun cayuse and put his foot in the stirrup. And then the Gambler called out to him;

there was something about Johnny's face that made the crowds on the sidewalks fall back.

"Sebon!" he called. "Turn around—Sebon!" He could have gunned him in the back as Sebon tired to mount; but the Gambler had never played it that way. He stood there empty-handed, forgetting that he held no gun.

Dal Sebon froze, then dropped his foot from the stirrup, and whipped around with a gun up. Only then did the Gambler go for his shoulder rig. It was a work of art, the terrible speed and dexterity of his hands. Sebon shot once, and almost in the same split instant, Gambler Johnny's .32 was out and hacking powder flame through the moonlight. It was just as the Cholla Center marshal and a deputy came running down from the jail.

Sebon's smoking weapon sagged in his hand, finally dropped from his fingers. He fell back against the dun he'd been about to mount, right arm smashed by the Gambler's bullet. The latter came walking in slowly, a deadly slim figure. Sebon hauled a second gun with his other hand, took one look into the eyes of the man moving on him, then dropped it in token of surrender. He'd gone yellow.

"Hell, that's Gambler Johnny from Big Belly's place!" yelped an amazed witness.

THEN THE town marshal was down and taking over with his deputy. A third man too, the one who was a stranger and known as Hauser. He walked up to Gambler Johnny.

"You're under arrest, Banfors," he said quietly, producing a badge. "I don't like to do it—but I got to take you back to Mulford for that shooting. Special officer of the governor's staff."

The Gambler looked again at Dal Sebon, then at the girl staring from the steps. He nodded to Hauser, switched his gun by the trigger guard, and extended it to him. "All right."

The State officer said, "You had me fooled when I looked you over tending bar at Big Belly's. You'd shaved off your mustache, Banfors. But when I saw you flip that gun just before, I knew; no man was ever so fast with his hands."

"Sure. Thanks," said the Gambler.

Hauser looked sad about it. "Don't sweat too much," he said as the crowd began to mill around. "I think you'll be cleared at the trial. Witnesses say that after that jasper you shot got cleaned out bucking you at stud, he went out, got lickered up, then came back and threw a shooting iron on you. You can claim self defense; you never should've run, Banfors."

The Gambler nodded. "I know that—now. That—that's why I've never taken a man's last dollar since; I hated myself for what happened."

Hauser offered him a tailor-made quirly. "'Nother thing that'll help you at the trial. You been sending that dead man's son dinero. That's how we finally traced you down—by the mails.... We'll go back together. I don't believe you'll be convicted—but it was my job to catch you.... And—"

The town marshal came over to question the Gambler....

HAUSER, the special state officer, and Gambler Johnny Banfors walked out of the Cholla jail. That was one charge on which the Gambler was not being held. Rasher, found unconscious in the livery stable alley, had wagged his jaw a-plenty to save his own skin; he implicated Dal Sebon in the murder of the drunkard, poor Ebrow. It would mean the rope for Sebon.

"We got to git a hoss for you, Banfors," Hauser said. "We'll leave come morning.... I got your word about swearing to attempt no escape? I don't want to put the handcuffs on a gent like you, Gambler."

Gambler Johnny nodded, ignoring the curious throng in the street. "You got my word, Hauser.... But they's one stop I'd like to make first." And when the special officer nodded, the Gambler led the way down the line to

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Digger John's Rescue

by

A. A. BAKER

(Author of "Digger John's Policy")

It was possible, with super-human effort, to get out to those immigrants, stranded in the storm. But getting back with them to safety was another matter!

Dredger Dan just about went berserk as Digger John lowered his gun away from the bear.

★

THE MIGHTY Sierras were throwing a mid-winter tantrum. Snow started high in the heavens and swirled down until the icy wind turned the snow to biting ice. Ice crystals swept through the trees and clung until their accumulated weight dragged the branches and left desperate claw marks on the surface. The storm lashed every living thing exposed and a group of immigrants shrank together in their makeshift camp at the east slope of the mountains.

Each flake of snow was like the dirt pitched in an open grave to cover a coffin; these snowflakes, like a sexton, were buying the marooned immigrants. They waited for rescue but were not sure that rescue would come; what men would take the risk of pushing through such a storm?

In the warm barroom of Gold Run's hotel, Dredger Dan dipped the tin cups deep in the whiskey barrel while a miner fed red manzanita branches into the blistered stove. "Pour on thet fire, Juke!" shouted the squat proprietor. "The men'll start stragglin' in. Thet is, the men thet had sense enough to leave the canyons afore this blister started blowin'."

Dredger swallowed some of his words, then continued in a low voice. "They mighta had a chanc't to git them wagon train people through if this storm hadn't started, but they's dam' little chanc't naow! This kinda storm is called Pogonip by the Indians. When she snows, an' then freezes on the way down, they'll find dead ones in the spring. Digger John should'a never started but I guess he's like the rest of the blinkin' forty-niners; if'n they hear they's a bobcat in trouble they'll go out an' rescue the critter!"

The miner spat against the stove and waited till the proper *shpff* emanated from the glowing sides before he spoke. "Well, you gotta remember those folks have been snowed in for three weeks now. If they ain't got out soon, they'll never git out!"

"The idjits got in by theirselves," growled Dredger. "Naow they's good men out in thet storm thet might not come back. Take Digger John, thet whiskery ol' devil! He's wuth more to this town than all the immigrants thet's ever come out o' the east. He's fought with the mountain men an' starved on the rivers and froze in the canyons since the rush started. Lived three winters on thet Donner Lake until the animules got to know him by name. Jest lookin' fer gold an' stayin' there until he found it! He's the kind of men this country needs. He's wuth more: . . ."

The miner picked up a short length of firewood and started toward the bar. "They's wimmen and children out in thet wagon train. Thet's why Digger an' the rest of the boys are out a tryin' to bring them in. I'd be with them if'n you hadn't let yore dang board walk git covered with ice so's I slip an' strain my laig! But, bad laig or no bad laig, I'm goin' to bend this stick over yore head if'n yew don't shut thet yap of yores!"

THE DOOR slammed open and ice particles swept into the room driving a frozen group of men close to the stove. They stamped the snow from their boots, slapped it from one another's backs. Their leader clawed the ice from his whiskers and shouted; "Start in a'dippin' them whiskey cups, Dredger; yew two kin do yore roughhousin' after we git thawed out."

"Didcha find the wagon train, Digger?" asked the miner.

"Naw, we got blocked out about Emigrant Gap," was the growled answer. "Somewhere's about where thet pack train went off into Bear Valley, last week. If'n thet pack train of hams an' stuff could of got through, those people thet's starvin' would 'a bin able to git through the winter."

Dredger smirked; but, before he spoke, he moved back behind the bar and out of reach of the miner, still holding the manzanita club. "Could 'a told yew it was useless to try to git them people out. They're snowed in fer the winter; jest as well set yore minds to it!"

The crowd of tired men grunted as Digger answered the petulant barman. "We'll git them, one way or t' other. Reminds me of the time I outrun them Sioux Indians. Looked like I was a goner. It was back in the Rockies, afore California was heerd of. They jumped me an' I got a little lead. Them Indians was strong runners an' they was figurin' on wearin' me down; gotta always be figurin' to come out ahead. Thet's why I'm here

today. You know...."

The crunch of snow heralded the appearance of a stranger. He was lean and his suffering steps faltered; he fell onto the sawdust-covered floor before he could reach the bar. Digger's stubby fingers raised the man's head and the stranger opened his eyes, tried to speak. "Jest relax, friend," cautioned Digger; "drink a mite of this red eye."

The stranger gulped, coughed, and lay back relaxed. "You one of the people thet's snowed in on the far side of the mountains?" asked Digger.

"Yeah. Me and two other men started out before this storm hit. Figured to git through an' bring some grub back. My wife and three younguns is still in there! Starvin' like all the rest! Some dead of starvation already!" The man rolled over on his face and wept into the wet sawdust.

"Whar's the other two fellas?" Digger spoke as though the question was useless.

"They died on the way," came the expected reply. "We was all pretty weak when we started. When they give out I left them 'cause I knew one of us had to get through. Martha an' the kids ain't gonna die if'n I kin hep it!" He lurched to his feet, stood weaving for a few seconds as he focused his eyes.

"If'n I kin impose on yew fer a bag of grub, I'll get started back. I told her to wait two days after I left, an' then start out this way with the kids; I figured if'n I was goin' to make it we'd have a better chance to meet her on the way. If'n I didn't make it through, at least they'd die tryin' to get out an' thet's better'n sittin' an' waitin' to die!"

The men stood in an awed group. Outside the wind mocked as the snow cold air banged on the door in a last effort to snatch at the man who had braved the storm to save his family. They knew this stranger was determined to fight again that twenty-five miles of blizzard struck mountain.

"WELL," SHOUTED Dredger Dan, coming out from behind the bar and reaching for his coat, "what yew idjits goin' to do? Stand around an' let this man's family die on the Hill? He can't git back, the shape he's in. Digger, yew got them packs of food—where are they? I'm goin' up on thet mountain an' find them people, at least this man's wife an' kids!"

Digger John spoke, and Juke, the miner, hid Dredger's club behind his back and edged over to the stove. "We left the food up at the Gap. We couldn't git through, so we hung it in a tree, We was lucky to git back without carryin' all thet weight.

"I'm thinkin' the same thing as yew; we gotta try agin, now thet we know this woman and the kids has left the camp an' is most likely freezin' out in them mountains! But, we ought'a go out in relays, kinda. Dredger an' me'll lead off, an' then, a few hours later a couple more of yew come on after us. Thet way, if'n we find them, the next relay'll be needed to bring us all in. We might git up there, but we'll need help gittin' back. The relays will be able to set up shelters an' have warm food ready so's we kin work back in easy stages. Think it'll work?"

"Sure it'll work!" answered Dredger. "One camp at Emigrant Gap; another 'bout ten miles further, where the wagons stop an' cross the north fork. Thet ought'a do it. If'n Digger an' me kin find the woman an' kids, we'll expect the relays to have things ready when we start back. Let us git goin', Digger!"

The miner name Juke laughed. "Dredger, how come yew changed yore mind? A few minutes ago yew said...."

Dredger shrugged into his big coat and shouted. "Thet was before I knew what I know now! Anyhow, I've always wanted to git out on the trail with this danged loudmouthed Digger John an' see if'n he could back up his tall stories! Never be a better time to find out!" ,

THE TWO men ducked out into the storm and began their tedious rescue journey. After five hours

of steady plodding, they reached Emigrant Gap. Dredger was cold and belligerent when they began a search for the food hidden in the trees. "Wal, where'd yew leave it? Don't tell me yew hid ten pack sacks of food an' can't find it?"

"They's bin about twenty-four inches of fresh snow," answered Digger, "an' by golly, it's all covered up; but it's here somewhere's around!"

"Thet pack team went off around here!" growled Dredger, "Kin yew find thet?"

"Thet was lost four days ago." Digger said. "Should be under three-four foot of snow by now. We can't waste time lookin' fer the pack sacks or the pack train; we'll have to go on an' figure the relays'll find it an' bring it on to the camps. The way this wind is blowin' we kin stay on the ridges which should be blown clear of the deep snow. We had to quit here before but the wind wasn't as strong then an' the ridges were covered deep."

Dredger Dan agreed "Shore—we gotta go on but with yore mistakes it'll be suicide! How'd yew ever live as long as yew have?"

The day lengthened as the two men fought their perilous way up the mountains. The wind rolled the falling snow in mistles and pelted their exposed faces; gullies afforded protection from the wind but the snow was packed deep and the men had to stay on the open ridges where they had precarious footing.

The drifts got deeper and the men realized that every step took them closer to the limits of their strength. If they *did* find the family could they get them back to the relay camps and, more important would the camps be there? If the men following could not find the packsacks, would *they* venture deeper into the storm or give up and turn back? Both Digger and Dredger Dan realized it would be easy for the relay men to decide the task was hopeless without food. Even if the marooned people were found, where would be the incentive to urge them through the storm without the promise of something to eat?

DIGGER was breaking trail, when a cold hand reached out from an icy bush and grasped his arm. Startled, he looked and saw a woman, huddled in the scant protection of the bush and, nestling tightly against her, three small children.

"You've come!" were the only words she spoke, "You've come!" It wasn't a shout, a whisper nor a prayer; the words were repeated again and again as Digger and Dredger swiftly scraped the snow aside and built a fire. They didn't speak but the thought that froze in their minds was that they'd come all right—but how far back could they go?

When the fire was started, Dredger dug under his shirt and came up with a small flask of whiskey. The children were given a small swallow and the woman a large one; Digger and Dredger killed the bottle.

"Thank Gawd, Arnold got through!" The woman said when the fire finally penetrated and forced the cold from their bodies.

Digger gazed into the night and asked, "Kin yew tell me how many people is left in thet camp?"

"About twenty. The food is gone and they'll die if you can't git through soon. Are there more men following you with food?"

Digger smiled. "Yes M'am. The food is coming but if the people are starvin', we'll have to git them out before the other men can git here. Dredger, yew git these folks warm an' then backtrack to the camp at North Fork. The relays will have reached there by the time yew arrive. I'm goin' on an' git them people movin' this way. Have another camp made here an' I'll try to git them this far."

Dredger Dan pulled Digger out of earshot and demanded. "Yew crazy? We don't know if'n the camps are set or not. If the boys couldn't find them packs at Emigrant Gap, they must'a turned back! We'll all freeze afore we ever git back off this mountain!"

"Yew gotta look at the bright side, Dredger. I got a feelin' they'll have them camps a'goin'. Even if'n they don't, maybe they did turn back at

Emigrant Gap; we gotta try an' git these people out, else they'll die anyway. Yew do what I told yew! It's somethin' like the time I outrun them Indians. I had an idea an' took a chanc't an' sure enough the idea worked an' I'm alive today. Anyway, like the lady's husband says, 'It's better to try an' git out than jest sittin' an' dyin'!' " The whiskery miner patted the little barkeeper on the shoulder, brushed a branch aside and, when the branch swung back he was gone.

The graying dawn brought no relief in the storm but, to the starving people, huddled at the foot of Donner Pass, the sight of a snow-covered man brought a feeling of hope, which was dashed when they discovered he was alone. Digger faced the group and spoke. "We got relay camps set up over the Hill. If'n yew stay here, yew'll die fer sure, so I come to lead yew out. Them thet has spunk enough to try it better follow me!" Without additional words, Digger John turned and, wearily, started back over the trail. He didn't look back until he reached the ridge; then he turned and grinned as he counted twenty immigrants plodding wearily in his tracks.

The storm raged unabated over the peaks of the mighty Sierras and beat some of the weaker members to their knees but they were lifted and carried by the stronger; all arrived in the first relay camp, where Dredger Dan waited with a roaring fire. He gazed helplessly at the frost-bitten group and laid a trembling hand on Digger's arm. Digger nodded and turned to the group. "Warm yoreself's but make it fast; we have to git along. They's another relay camp ahead an' another fire."

"Is there any food?" A woman asked in a pitiful voice, "my children are hungry and suffering terrible."

"There'll be food." Digger promised in a somewhat hollow voice. Dredger shrugged and turned away.

There was dull excitement and the party started on. Digger plodded ahead but his face was seamed with worry; he knew now the rescuers had not been able to find the knapsacks and the next relay camp would have a fire but no food. This party would not have the strength to go much farther. It was pretty futile. The men in the rescue party had braved the storm to build the camps, and the fires; but without food, the entire party had a slim chance ever to reach the haven of Gold Run. Rescued and rescuers would die on the slopes of these mountains and the snow would cover their bodies until spring.

Their only hope was to locate the knapsacks or find the buried packtrain. The men's guns would have no target, because any animal large enough for them to eat would be holed in, or would have drifted ahead of the storm into the valleys below. Even a bear would not be of much help, for the bears on this mountain were small and would provide a sparse mouthful for such a large party.

Such were the dismal thoughts that paced through Digger's mind when a brown dot on the next ridge caught his eye. He stared hard and motioned for the group to halt; Digger raised his long rifle and sighted, then slowly, lowered his gun.

Dredger Dan stared, in disbelief, then screamed; "It's a bear! Shoot, yew blasted idjit! It's gittin' away!" The snow covered immigrants echoed Dredger's words with a low moan, as the bear galloped over the ridge and disappeared.

Digger spoke sadly. "It wouldn't be hu-mane. Thet poor little feller is hungry, jest like we are. He was drove out of his warm den because he was hungry and he wouldn't be a bite apiece fer this gang. Nosirree, it wouldn't be hu-mane....why...." The words died in Digger's throat when Dredger Dan, berserk with fear and anger, smashed him with a four foot length of broken limb! The mountain man sank soundlessly into the drifted snow as Dredger shouted; "Follow me folks, leave him lay for the coyotes to pick his bones! We'll all die on this mountain but let's git

on to the next relay camp where at least we kin die warm! If'n the fool had killed thet bear, we'd a had a chance."

THERE WAS no hope now. The group stepped numbly past the supine man and paced along behind Dredger; they all realized that death awaited and they plodded on to meet it....

The camp at Yuba was reached and the fire burned brightly but, without food, the numbed party was wordless and silently cursed the man, lying far back in the deep snow, for letting the bear escape. One mouthful of food might have given them the courage to continue but he had let it escape!

Back where Digger lay, the wind screamed, but the man did not hear. A huge wad of snow dropped from the tree above but he did not wake. The blood oozed from the cut on his head and froze on his neck. The storm mounted in fury and seemed to shake the ground as though trying to waken Digger. Finally, in desperation, the wind took a low hung branch and beat it furiously against his body. Digger rolled over and clawed the snow from his whiskers; he stared around and then remembered the bear, the blow from Dredger's stick, and grinned thinly.

The storm tore through the trees and puffed the snow in swirls, like a playful puppy scurries through tall grass in search of rabbits. Digger shook his big body and set out on a staggering trot, not in the direction of the Yuba Fork but on the trail of the bear! While he trotted, he hummed a little song in his throat. The powder snow filled his footprints behind him and he disappeared in the direction the bear had taken.

Two tired and hopeless men hugged the fire at the Emigrant Gap relay camp, waited in dread for the arrival of the other men because they had not been able to find the food that had been hung in the trees. Without it the chances of ever getting back to Gold Run were slim. The rescuers might make it but the starving people they were trying to get out would be completely exhausted and would die.

They hurried to their feet as a ghost entered the clearing. "Keep the fire goin', boys! Keep the kittle hot! I'm goin' to bring in the food!" It was Digger John and he was a staggering, shouting wreck. His clothes were torn and blood oozed from under his hat. "Jest give me a few more minutes. I'm goin' to show yew how to find thet food. I ain't shore yet if'n it'll be the knapsacks or the pack train but I got someone out lookin' who'll find one or t'other!"

DIGGER moved up to the fire and stood close until his clothes steamed and the edge of his long coat began to smoke. The gentle hands of the watchers pulled him back and beat out the sparks.

"Yew'll be all right, John! Jest sit and rest."

"Rest, hell; they's people up in the next relay camp thet needs food! We gotta git it to them; wait a few more minutes and we'll go out an' see if'n he's found it!"

"Who's lookin'? Dredger? We bin lookin' fer hours—the food's buried deep somewhars."

"Nah, not Dredger. I left him up with the immigrants. Nah, *he* couldn't find it, and yew couldn't find it; but I got someone lookin', someone who knows how to find it. He should be thar by now; let's go!" Digger staggered out into the snow and the two puzzled men followed.

A hundred yards away they stopped and stared. Digging through the top layer of snow was a brown bear. He backed out of the hole and gazed at the men, then climbed back into the hole and emerged with a burlap-wrapped ham, gazed scornfully at the three men and trotted into the trees.

Digger chuckled. "Thet's my boy! Poor old bear got hungry an' woke up from his winter siesta. He got cold because he didn't have a good chance last fall to cover his old bones with enough fat to last all winter, so he gets hungry an' cold and comes out of his den an' goes shoppin' fer us!

"He's had a lot of trainin' lookin' fer food. If'n I'd a shot him up on

the trail, we'd have all died. Wait'll I git hold of thet Dredger Dan! He hits a'fore a man has a chance to tell him anything. Thet bear wouldn't have been a bite apiece but his knowledge of where to look for food will save everyone of us. To live in this country, yew gotta use yore brains an' every other thing's brains! Thet's the buried packtrain, loaded with all kinds of eats. Now we'll git off this mountain in one piece. Start loadin' up them hams an' stuff, we gotta git up to thet Yuba Cap camp; them people are hungry!"

LATER, THE barroom of Dredger Dan's hotel was full and the tin cups were passed freely, to rescued and rescuers. They were spent and battered, but the entire party, after feeding on hams cooked over a roaring fire, had safely arrived in Gold Run and were shaking the chill out of their bones with Dredger's red-eye. The fire roared and the wet sawdust around the batwing doors was steaming as the men listened to the roaring voice of Digger John.

"Yesiree, life in the west is tough and filled with narrow escapes. I remember back in the Rockies...."

"Listen, Digger," interrupted Dredger Dan, "afore we started up the mountain to bring back them immigrants, yew was makin' talk about outsmartin' them Sioux Indians. Yew was tellin' about some trick yew...."

"Sure, I remember, Dredger. Here's how I done it. Now yew know them Indians kin outrun a white man, so's yew have to use yore brains to git away. Well, when I was runnin', I figured her out. I jest run on one lung at a time. I'd breathe with one lung fer awhile and then the other fer awhile.

"Naow, I'll bet they ain't another man in the whole world that ever thunk of thet trick an' Dredger, I'm passin' it on to you, free! Jest as soon as I finish this drink I'm taking out and skinnin' yew alive fer smackin' me with thet club. If'n yew take my advice, yew'll start runnin' naow so's to git a little bit of a head start!" Digger drew his bowie and the hotel man didn't wait to see if Digger was serious or not; when the batwing doors to the bar swung closed, the men in the bar could hear his boots clumping down the snow-covered sidewalk!

THE END

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TUNE

Joe Hudkins remembered his father's policy for relieving tension in the valley — a get-together for everyone. But Joe couldn't know that this would only further sinister plans . . .

PAT KEARNEY leaned back and the heavy chair groaned under the weight of his huge body. He tipped his head back, looked squarely at Joe Hudkins, rubbed a hand across the stubble on his chin and asked, "Why?"

"Because the Valley's worth keeping peace in," Hudkins replied. He stood in front of Kearney's desk, tall slender, red-haired, his blue eyes flush on the burly cattleman. His face had a worried look. "Spade swings a lot of weight in the Valley; when the word gets around, Torrman and the others will follow your lead."

"Just to rub shoulders with a bunch of sod-busters," Kearney's face quivered. "Your father was a cattleman and a sheriff before you; it doesn't make sense that his son should be out tootin' a horn for a gang of barb wire men and plows."

"You're doing pretty well on that section you put in wheat," Joe said levelly. He turned and looked out the window of Kearney's ranchhouse. "My father started the annual dance for folks in the Valley. He meant all of them. Said it created good will. There's been hard feelings and we need some fun." Hudkins turned back to Pat Kearney. "I don't intend to stand back and see narrow-minded, people kill it."

"So I'm narrow-minded, am I?"

Kearney's face purpled. "Get this straight, Hudkins: the nesters don't like me because I can beat them at their own game—wheat. I don't like *them* because we've had too many petty thieves lately since they've infested the Valley." He slapped both big paws flat on the desk top. "But I'll play it your way, once; Spade will be there. How about Bert Lane? He leads the nesters."

"Lane will be there." Hudkins studied the man in front of him, feeling new hope replace the sense of futility that was in him. Most of the cattlemen had resented the inflow of farmers, and last summer's drouth had fanned the ill-feeling almost to a pitch. Thirsty cattle had broken into farmer's fields and the nesters had raised Cain and strung barb wire. Flames had been fanned higher when beef started disappearing, for the thefts had been frequent, and too small to pay rustlers. A lot of ugly rumors had flown around that the nesters butchered steers to collect for the damage to their wheat.

Kearney didn't say anything and Hudkins thought, *Maybe I can keep the powder keg from blowing up.*

"Lane'll be there even after he knows I'm going to be around," Kearney said abruptly. Pat gave a short laugh. "That'll be worth going to see; he's sore-headed because I jerked my well-drilling rig off his place last summer and the bank won't renew his loan."

"It's make it a lot easier if you went back and drilled some water holes on Lane's place." Joe said. "The more water we have in this Valley the better off we'll all be." He wet his lips, knowing that his next words wouldn't sit well. "You control the town's bank; it's you that won't renew Lane's mortgage."

"Yes, I run the bank; and the rig. I'm busy drilling hole on Spade land. This is cattle country; the quicker the sodbusters clear out, the better I'll like it; I don't like them and I don't like a turncoat cowman who packs a star and sides in with them!" He paused. "But Spade will be there."

Hudkins nodded. He had come for this purpose, half expecting a curt refusal. Kearney wasn't a man who changed his mind. On second thought Hudkins frowned; Pat Kearney might change his mind, but for a reason.

"I'm going to ask Maybelle Collins to play at the dance," Joe said.

A shade passed over Kearney's face. "Because Dave Collins works in my bank doesn't mean that I own him or his wife." Pat rubbed his chin, "Still, you'd better ask Dave; he *can* play a violin."

"I didn't know Dave could play," Joe thought of the dapperly-dressed Dave Collins, with his slender white hands, and pictured him holding a violin; the picture fitted.

Kearney's eyes were wide. "How'd you know about his wife, then?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I'm not blind," Pat said; "half the men in town wish she was single." He leaned forward, said soberly, "But I think Collins will kill any man who tries anything."

Hudkins' face reddened. "I heard her play at the Ladies Aid Society the night they dragged me up there for a talk." He felt relieved with the words.

Pat Kearney waved a hand. "I'm a busy man, Hudkins. We're settin' up the rig to drill another hole in the morning and I've got to ride out and see how things are moving along."

ALL THE WAY back to town, Joe Hudkins kept thinking about things. They were better. This was the chance he'd been working for; to get the two groups together. One thing gnawed at him, though: *If* trouble broke out the explosion would tear apart his scheme to create good feeling in the Valley.

Kearney's suggestion that Hudkins ask Dave Collins to help furnish music at the dance was sound. Joe turned the thought over in his mind and it was good. Dave Collins was new to the Valley, a quiet-spoken man who went his way alone and who had the prettiest wife on the range. When Hudkins thought of Maybelle Collins again he whistled. There was a wom-

an who knew of her beauty; he wondered what she saw in the meek and mild Dave Collins.

It was dark when Hudkins turned the jail over to his young deputy, Pete Willis and headed for the Collins house.

* * *

Maybelle Collins opened the door when Hudkins stepped on the porch, the smell of home-cooked food leaking past her. She was small, dark, with flashing eyes and a smile that was cool, yet inviting; Joe had the impression that, without too much effort, he could have taken her in his arms. Surprise flickered far down in the depths of her eyes at the sight of Hudkins.

"Why, sheriff," she said and the lilt in her voice was music in Hudkin's ears, "This is a surprise. Come on in; you're just in time for supper."

She led him into a nicely furnish room and called out, "Dave!"

Dave Collins came down from upstairs. He'd just finished shaving and the odor of talcum filled the room. He was slender with small features, his upper lip sporting a thin moustache. His shirt was clean, the cuffs turned up. Hudkins looked at Dave and felt the contrast of his own rough range clothes and the coarseness of his sun-beaten skin; he wondered again what a beautiful woman like Maybelle saw in the q u i e t, mousy man opposite him.

Collins s t u c k out his hand. "What've I done, sheriff," he asked. "Or Maybelle, here?" He laughed.

Maybelle interrupted. "I'll set an extra plate at the table, Dave."

"It's my own fault," Hudkins said quickly. "But I just finished eating supper at Pedro's place."

Maybelle a r c h e d an eyebrow, looked at him pityingly. "You poor man."

Collins patted his stomach. "It's worth being married just to eat Maybelle's cooking. But since it isn't Maybelle's cooking that bring you here, sheriff, what is it?" There was a faint trace of surprise in his voice.

"I want to ask you a favor."

Collins' face showed his surprise. He glanced from Maybelle back to Hudkins. Joe caught the look, saw the faint suspicion in it and wondered why.

"What favor?" Collins kept his voice blank. "I'm not a gun-slick; I wouldn't make a very good posseman."

"It's nothing to do with that," Joe said quietly. "But I just learned something today about you."

Again Collins looked at Maybelle, ran his hand across his slicked down hair. His grin had no humor and Hudkins felt surprised; Dave Collins looked sick.

JOE HUDKINS cut in f a s t. "Sure," he said. "I know all about you."

Collins wet his lips. "I don't follow you, sheriff."

"Why," H u d k i n s replied. "I learned you can play a violin."

Collins' face showed relief, he sighed. "Is that all you found out, sheriff?"

"Is there more?" Hudkins spoke slowly. "I want you to play at the dance with Maybelle."

Maybelle's lilting laugh came again. "See, Dave? I told you they'd find out about you." She came close to Hudkins and he felt the nearness of her, wondered again how the colorless Collins held a woman like Maybelle.

The faint pallor of Collins' face disappeared and his face reddened.

"Dave's just bashful," Maybelle said. "When we came from the East he wanted to be like the men out here, big and rugged." She came up to her husband and kissed him on the cheek.

Collins mumbled, "Damn it, Maybelle." He turned to Hudkins. "That's one of the troubles with a wife, a guy can't keep a secret." He fumbled with his cuffs. "But what she said is right, sheriff; I dont want to be laughed at out here."

"They won't laugh at you," Joe said quickly. "I can promise that."

"Why?" Collins asked resentfully. He pointed at the Colt on Hudkin's

hip. "Will you use your gun to stop them?"

Hudkins wanted to tell him that rough clothes didn't necessarily mean bad manners. He bit his lip; after all, Collins had his own viewpoint. Joe said softly, "Of course not, Collins. Maybe you haven't been here long enough. These people aren't ignorant. They'll have their wives and daughters in to this dance; you'll appreciated—probably envied."

Maybelle took Collins by the arm and smiled up at him. "I'm sure the sheriff is right, Dave; and we *do* want to make our place out here."

"Sure," Hudkins said. "And you don't have to call me, sheriff; my name's Joe."

Maybelle whispered in Collins' ear. "I'm sure Dave will say yes," she said musically in a low throbbing voice. "You see he's found living out here so different from back East".

"You'll like it," Joe tried to keep the picture of Maybelle out of his mind. *Take it easy,* he told himself. A woman like Maybelle wasn't meant for him—or for Collins either. "Pat Kearney suggested I ask you."

"Oh," Collins grinned weakly. "If the boss suggested it I guess I'd better be there."

Hudkins tried to keep the triumph out of his voice; this promised to be the best get-together the valley had ever had. "This valley has a lot to offer," he said; "and this dance means a lot. The nesters will be there and I'm sure I can get Bert Lane to sing."

"Bert Lane?" Maybelle asked. "I've heard of him."

Hudkins saw Collins' face twitch; he grinned.

Collins said, "Okay then. We'll be there, as long as Maybelle wants to."

Hudkins got the impression that Collins would do anything Maybelle wanted him to do. And what man wouldn't when she turned those dark eyes on him and looked right into the middle of his heart?

* * *

Outside the house, Hudkins breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to get away from those eyes and the smile that made blood pound in his temples. *Better watch her, Dave,* he thought.

2

FROM his spot in front of the county jail, Joe Hudkins could see the town fill up. It had started slowly at first but now that the evening chores on the farms was over, the nester element began to fill up the hitch rails and crowd the sidewalks.

Hudkins went up the street and saw with approval that the cattleman had followed the news that Kearney and his huge Spade outfit were coming in. He sensed that most of the cattlemen were glad that the tension that had gripped the Valley showed signs of breaking. *This is the night to break it,* he thought.

The stores stayed open late as nesters and cattlemen's wives seized the opportunity to shop. Later in the evening the single cowhands began to ride in until every hitch rail was crowded and the livery barns full. Even the saloons strung along. Hudkins visited each one and the owners, glad to see the trade mingled, agreed not to sell to a drunk. Hudkins left each one feeling better.

At seven o'clock he saw Bert Lane with his twelve year old son, Tommy, in the seat along side him, turn his buckboard into the main street and drift along hunting a place to tie up.

When they came in front of the jail, Hudkins waved at Lane and shouted, "Tie up h e r e, Bert." He ducked off the board sidewalk and stood beside the buckboard.

Bert Lane swung easily down from the seat. He was a short stockily built man with blond hair and blue eyes; Lane had a direct way of looking at a man as if he could see behind the thoughts and words.

"It looks like a big night," Lane said cheerfully as he tied the team

up. "I'm glad I let you talk me into coming, Joe; I'm going to leave Tommy at Mrs. King's boarding house until the shebang is over."

"He'll have a lot of company there," Hudkins replied. "I saw Sam Torrmant taking his boy there."

"Is Spade in?"

"Not yet," Hudkins kept his voice cheerful. "But Kearney gave me his word," he eyed the nester closely, remembering the ill-feeling that existed between the two men. Kearney had Bert Lane over a barrel with his loans from the bank and the entire valley knew it.

Except for a slight frown that disappeared almost instantly, Lane's face was unchanged. "Maybe this'll work out, Joe," he said. "I'm only doing what I can for the valley in general; some of us can't stand trouble."

Hudkins slapped Lane's shoulder. "There'll be no trouble," he promised.

Lane said, "That'll be fine." He pursed his lips. "I'm bringing in an out of county drilling rig, Joe. Some of the other farmers are in on it, too; we've got to have a steady water supply."

HUDKINS rolled the words over in his mind. They sounded good. "How about renting Kearney's rig," he asked.

"I tried." Lane shrugged his shoulders. "He jerked his rig off my place last summer and can't find time to come back." He leaned against his wagon, a sun-tanned fellow with laugh wrinkles at the corners of his eyes but his face was sober now. "He wants us to fail," he added bitterly. "All of us."

"Then he can't holler about you fellows hiring a strange rig then." Joe felt better; with adequate water, some of the nesters would quit stringing barb wire about the natural water holes that the cattlemen had used in the days of free range.

"That's what I thought," Lane said. "I guess you're thinking it'll help ease things here." He paused. "We know the cattlemen resent us." There was a touch of longing in his voice mingled with stubborness. "But this country is our home now."

"Forget it," Hudkins said quickly. "There'll be plenty of music and girls tonight. We've got Mr. and Mrs. Collins helping to furnish the music tonight." He grinned at Bert Lane. "And some of the nesters told me you're good at singing."

"Collins," Lane said, "You mean that little fellow in Kearney's bank."

"Yeah, and his wife, too." Hudkins answered. "Do you know her?"

"No," Lane replied. "No. I've just seen her from a distance."

"Her husband's a violin player," Hudkins replied. "And I've already heard his wife play the piano."

Lane said nervously, "Well, I've got to get Tommy to Mrs. King's." He appeared ill at ease.

"Do I hafta go to Mrs. King's?" Tommy Lane cut in. "Gee, Dad, why can't I stay and visit with the sheriff." The kid's eyes bulged at the sight of the bars across the window and at the Wanted posters on the sun-warped bulletin board outside. He was a short, sturdy youngster with his father's blond hair, and his scrubbed face was bright as a newly washed window. He jammed a hand into an inner pocket and brought out something in his fist. He held it toward Hudkins.

"An arrowhead," he said, unclasping his fingers. "See, sheriff. A real Indian arrow. I betcha it's hundreds of years old."

"It probably is," Joe took it in his hand. "Where'd you get it?"

"From Box Canyon," Tommy answered proudly. "I find lots of things up there."

"That's a long way for a kid to ride," Hudkins said. He handed the arrowhead back.

Bert Lane said, "I think it's time we got started, Tommy; we'll see you again, sheriff."

"The folks count on you singing some," Hudkins said. "You'll have fine music backing you up."

"Pop's the best singer on the range," Tommy said proudly. "Even

if he doesn't like what I bring home all the time."

"Kid brought home some bones one time," Bert Lane said. His voice had lost its reserve. "He should spend more time on his books." He took Tommy by the hand.

"Folks are drifting up to the hall fast," Hudkins said. "After you get up there and whirl those pretty girls around you'll want to sing."

Lane gave a big wink and grinned. He went up the street, little Tommy by his side and Hudkins put a foot on the board sidewalk and watched him. The country could use men like Bert Lane. Trouble, he thought, would fade away after tonight. He gave silent thanks to his father who believed that a laugh and a bit of fun would heal trouble faster and better than a sixgun.

IT WAS ten o'clock before Joe saw his deputy, Pete Willis, come in from having taken a prisoner to the sheriff in the next county and Hudkins turned the jail over to him.

Outside it was light with a big yellow moon that cast soft shadows on the sun baked streets of the town. The streets were full of punchers and farmers drifting back and forth and and from the open windows in the hall above Reiden's store music blared out into the night. Even from the street it sounded good and Hudkins stood and soaked some of it in.

At the foot of the hallway a group of men parted when he came up. Hudkins exchanged cheery greetings with them. A few days ago these men had been edgy, suspicious of each other and now the hardness had been rubbed off. They stood there, a mingled group of farmers, cattlemen and townsmen and exchanged small talk.

Someone slapped Hudkins on the back and said, "Nice work, sheriff. We're glad you promoted it."

Hudkins went up the steps fast. His father's theory was right; music and laughs outclassed guns and powdersmoke.

When he entered the big hall a square dance with three full sets was in full blast. He found a spot along the wall and stood watching. Old Rufe Simms who handled the coach for the stage line outfit did the calling and his voice filled the hall. He saw Pat Kearney, his big good-looking face flushed with pleasure, dancing in a set, and then he spotted Bert Lane.

Joe whistled to himself. This was even better than he had expected. Kearney and Lane were in the same set. He looked up at the platform where the musicians were and sucked in his breath. Maybelle Collins wore just enough red to set off her dark beauty. Dave Collins' violin bow had magic in it.

The dance finished and Hudkins saw Maybelle leave the piano and his eyebrow's raised. Collins stayed on the platform and he guessed that Maybelle was going to dance. He started to cut over to her then reminded himself that someone had probably already asked her and out of curiosity he waited to see. Dave Collins' eyes followed Maybelle but his face was bland, innocent of emotion. He cradled the violin to his shoulder.

IT WAS a round dance and Joe Hudkins saw Bert Lane cut across the floor and meet Maybelle. It was a fast dance and Maybelle's hair whirled as Lane spun around the floor with her. Hudkins smiled; maybe they did call Lane a plow jockey but on a dance floor his feet were fast and sure. They went by him and Maybelle gave him a big smile. Hudkins tried to stop his emotions but failed; Maybelle was enough to make any man's heart jump.

The Ladies Aid had pitched in and helped with a table loaded with sandwiches and big pitchers of iced lemonade. Every now and then a couple would drift over and Hudkins forgot Maybelle and her dancing eyes and the look in Bert Lane's face. They were mixing. He watched cowhands squiring farmers' daughters and the nesters danced and flirted with the daughters of cattlemen. He saw old Sam Torrmant, who next to Kearney, ran the biggest cow outfit in the

Valley over by the lemonade stand and cut across the floor to talk to him.

Joe was halfway across the floor when the dance ended and someone tugged at his sleeve. He turned around and saw Maybelle. Lane grinned, said, "Hi, sheriff."

"I can squeeze in another dance," Maybelle said. The scent of perfume she wore made Hudkins' head whirl. "It's a waltz."

"That's an invitation, sheriff," Bert Lane said genially; "if you don't take it I will."

"I'll try it," Hudkins said. "But you'll have to keep out of the way of my feet." He thought again as he watched the color in her cheeks that here was the prettiest woman he had ever seen—And the most dangerous; she knew her power.

She laughed, a tinking merry laugh. "I'm not afraid of that, sheriff."

"You call me, Joe," Hudkins said softly. "My friends do."

She pouted prettily. "Then I'm a friend, Joe?"

"Sure," he answered. "How's your husband making out?"

"He's enjoying all of this," she replied. "He admires you, Joe."

Bert Lane said, "You'd better get started, Joe, before I cut in."

The music started for another dance. Maybelle gave a merry laugh and Hudkins led her away. He saw a faint twitch in Lane's face and a cloudiness in his eyes.

She was the best partner, Joe Hudkins realized quickly, that he had ever been on a dance floor with. She had the knack of making a man feel that he was dancing with a feather in his arm, but the nearness of her body and the warmth of her made his blood pound. As they swung in front of the music platform Hudkins flashed a glance to Dave Collins. Collins grinned back but without humor. Pat Kearney's warning came back to Hudkins then, *"I think he'd kill any man for her."*

The dance came to an end. Dave Collins put his violin away and made his way down from the stand. "Let's have a drink, sheriff," he said, leading the way to the lemonade stand. "You're a good dancer, I see."

Hudkins said warily, "Your wife makes any man a good dancer."

Maybelle laughed gaily.

"I'll wet my throat with this," a husky voice said.

HUDKINS turned and saw Pat Kearney. The Spade owner's face was bland. He filled a glass, drained it.

Joe said, "I see most of your hands here."

Kearney said, "I gave my word, Hudkins. I left just a night crew and Slim Watterson at Spade." He turned to Dave Collins, rubbed his chin, said briskly. "You're a lucky man, Dave; your wife is not only beautiful but certainly can play a piano."

Collins flushed. He stammered, "Thanks Mr. Kearney."

"Yes sir," Kearney added. "She and Bert Lane were the best dancers on the floor." He gave Hudkins a hearty grin; "Sorry, sheriff, but you ran second in this race."

Maybelle said, "Thanks, Mr. Kearney." She gave Hudkins a grin just as Bert Lane came up. "But we'd better get back up on the stand Dave." She saw Bert Lane then and added, "And I'm sure that Mr. Lane will sing again for us. Won't you, Bert?" The last word slipped out and Hudkins saw pretty white teeth clamp over her lip for an instant.

Bert Lane was a goner, Hudkins thought as he watched both of the Collins' lead him to the stand. He shoved the thought out of his mind. Bert Lane would know better than to flirt with a woman like Maybelle.

He stood there, listening to Lane sing. The nester had a deep rich voice that filled the hall and caused everyone to watch.

Pat Kearney said just as the song ended. "I hear the nesters are bringing in an out county drilling rig." He rubbed his chin, his eyes half closed.

"They are," Joe answered. He wondered what Kearney was hinting at. The big rancher had no basis to

gripe. "It'll make it better for everybody to have more water on this range." He watched the change of expression on Kearney's face, and wondered what laid back of the grey eyes. "Why don't you use your rig, Kearney?"

"Because I need it myself," Kearney said suddenly. "This is cattle country; I'm not helping any nester."

"You loaned some of them money." Hudkins prodded him.

"I didn't figure on them using barb wire around every water hole the cattlemen hadn't claimed," Kearney's voice rasped. Then he grinned, "I don't aim to argue about it with you sheriff. But the ranchers won't like it when they see a rig coming in. The nesters might stay."

"You're the only one that's complained," Hudkins answered sharply.

KEARNEY grinned. "Alright." He glanced up at the platform where Lane had just finished another song. "Lane doesn't hide it very well, does he?"

Hudkins didn't reply. He had seen the same gleam in Lane's face.

Kearney said softly, "I think Dave Collins will kill anybody that tries to take her away from him. You can't tell about these quiet guys."

"You're worse than an old woman," Hudkins said angrily; "I know Bert Lane better than that. After all I danced with her, too."

"But you didn't look at her the way he did," Kearney's voice was sly. He rubbed his chin. "I wouldn't be surprised at anything these nesters might do."

The big clock hung far up on the wall bonged eleven o'clock.

Hudkins was at the far end of the hall dancing with a cute little blonde, the daughter of a cattleman, his thoughts on Kearney's suspicions when voices shouted from the hallway.

The little blonde said, "Say, Joe, watch where you're leading me."

Hudkins mumbled, "Sorry." He swung around so that he faced the door. He saw a knot of cowhands, most of them Spade, push their way through the crowded dance floor. Somebody shouted, "Where's Pat Kearney?"

"I'll see you later," Hudkins said. He left the little blonde and hurried toward the door. Something was wrong.

He heard Kearney shout, "Here, Slim."

He saw it then.

Slim Watterson, Kearney's ramrod, held a stiff, dirt caked and dried blood smeared cowhide in the air above his head. The dancers halted, the music died away.

3

EVEN Dave Collins stopped, his bow scraping a sour note that whanged above the hum of voices.

"What the Devil is this?" Pat Kearney grabbed the hide from Slim Watterson. He waved it in the air as Joe Hudkins shoved his way through the crowd. Kearney's blocky face purpled with rage. His voice shook with anger.

As Hudkins shoved in Slim Watterson said hoarsely. "I cut a trail onto Lane's farm and follered it." He was a gaunt man, shoulders humped, eyes close together. His big Adams apple danced a jig as he talked. "I found a spot where it'd been butchered and th' skin buried." He looked around the crowd, conscious that he was the center of attraction.

Two veins throbbed on Pat Kearney's forehead.

Hudkins cut in fast, knowing that trouble laid here. "Let's see that hide, Kearney." He held out his hand. "Slim, why didn't you take it to my office?"

Slim Watterson wet his lips. He looked at big Kearney, said nervously, "I—I—figgered you'd both be here."

Bert Lane forged in between Watterson and Kearney. His features were set, hard. "That's a damn lie," he rasped; "nobody butchered any Spade beef on my land!"

Watterson's hand slapped against the butt of his sixgun. Hudkins, moving faster, grabbed his wrist; the motion shoved Watterson back, left a gap between the two Spade men. *A fight here,* thought Hudkins, *would be the fuse that would light the powder keg. In this crowded space a gunbattle would drench the valley with blood.*

"You lying, two-bit, thieving sodbuster!" Joe heard Pat Kearney roar.

Hudkins whipped around, Slim Watterson forgotten, just as Kearney, fast in spite of his size, charged Bert Lane.

Kearney's bear-like body crashed into the smaller, sturdy figure of the farmer, rocking him across the crowded floor, past screaming women and shouting men, into the wall. Lane swung and the smack of his fist on Kearney's jaws brought a howl of approval from the nesters and shouts of anger from the cattlemen.

Hudkins jumped. Kearney and Lane were the kingpins to break apart. A foot thrust out from the circle of watchers tripped him and the force of his rush made him stumble across the floor, trip over a chair and sprawl on the floor. Hudkins got up, face reddened at the jeers, headed for the fighters.

Kearney drove a looping swing deep into Lane's stomach and the nester's face turned dead white. The blow touched off a riot. Hudkins huried fast, trying to weave his way through a mass of struggling men, reluctant to use a gun. His heart sank; all the hopes he had built on the results of this dance were gone. Things were in a worse mess than before. The ill-feeling had changed into blows.

In spite of Kearney's advantage in size, Hudkins was surprised. Lane was still on his feet and his blows rammed into Kearney's body like the sound of a man driving a post. Kearney's confident look had faded; his eyes glazed.

MOVING FAST now, Hudkins shoved aside a nester and a cowhand, swapping punches who staggered in front of him. He grabbed Bert Lane by an arm, yanked him back just as the nester swung from the floor. Off balance, the blow whistled past Kearney's bull dog jaw.

Kearney grunted, "So you're a cowman at last, Joe," he pulled toward Lane.

"Keep out, Joe," Lane panted. He struggled to free himself. "Is this why you asked us up here?"

"Hold 'em," roared Kearney, "I'll finish the damn thief!"

Lane said through swollen lips, "I don't need any cowman law to fight for me." He jerked loose from Hudkins' grip.

Kearney roared, rushed forward.

Hudkins stepped in and met him with a punch that jarred Hudkins' entire body. Kearney's head jerked back. He spat blood, kept coming. The weight of his body shoved Hudkins off balance. Then Kearney was going past him, headed for Lane and somebody laughed.

The laugh spurred Hudkins. He had to stop Kearney and Lane now! To stop them meant to stop the brawl. He heeled around, grabbed Kearney by his shirt, hung on. Kearney swore. He whipped around; his giant fist drove straight for Hudkin's face. Hudkins ducked, thinking that if Kearney won, he might as well turn his badge in and the thought drove him anew. He went under the blow, felt the weight of Kearney's arm on his shoulder, drove a punch that traveled about a foot before it smacked into Kearney's square chin.

Kearney's tongue stuck out between gasping lips. He stood still and Hudkins halted his next swing, reluctant to hit a man who was out on his feet. Kearney weaved, went down with a crash.

Lane panted, "Why didn't you keep out?" He brushed hair out of his eyes.

Hudkins said, "I'm running you in for tonight, Lane—both of you." He was aware of the crowd watching him, knowing that if he weakened the damage could never be knit.

Kearney scrambled about on the floor. His hands spread out and he heaved himself up. Slim Watterson rushed up.

"That's it," he mumbled, "Run him in."

"Both of you," Hudkins said. "Till you cool off."

He was aware now that Pete Willis was beside him, his face eager. He left Pete at the hall, heard music start behind him—but no one danced, as he marched the two men down the steps and across the street, past gaping onlookers and into the jail.

When they were inside Pat Kearney spoke for the first time. He said, "Damn you, Hudkins. I'm not forgetting this."

Hudkins turned the key in the lock. He said. "I'll check into that hide, Kearney." He thought bitterly. "This is bad for you, Joe. And bad for the valley."

Bert Lane said softly, "How about Tommy, sheriff?" He put his hands on the bar. "He'll be worried."

"I'll see him," promised Hudkins. "You'll be out in the morning."

"You don't think I butchered one of Spade's steers, do you," Lane asked.

Hudkins pursed his lips. "No," he said slowly. "But it's bad for you Lane; if Kearney wants to cause trouble over it, he can."

* * *

"YOU'LL find your team and buckboard in the livery stable," Joe Hudkins told Lane the next morning. "Mrs. King took care of him."

Lane squared his shoulders. "Thanks. But now every cattleman in the valley thinks I'm a thief."

"I let Kearney out an hour ago," Hudkins said thoughtfully. "He's not pressing any charges."

"He doesn't need to," Lane replied. He stalked out before Hudkins could explain to him that Slim Watterson had shown him where he had trailed the steer from Spade ground to Lane's farm and even the spot where the hide had been buried.

Hudkins pulled a bag of tobacco out of his pocket and rolled a smoke while he stared at Lane's retreating figure. He had a let-down feeling; things were worse now.

Yet when he saw Maybelle Collins come down the street his heart jumped. He mumbled at himself for allowing the sight of her to affect him, reminding himself that she was another man's wife. Yet he cut across the street.

Her eyes were bright. "Good morning," and the words were music. Her teeth sparkled between red lips. "I'm glad you weren't hurt last night, or that nice Mr. Lane either."

"There's nothing done that time won't heal," Hudkins said and wondered if she could read the doubts in his mind.

"I'm on my way to see Dave," she said. "He really envies the way you handled those men last night.

Hudkins tried to keep the emotion out of his voice. *Better watch yourself,* he told himself. *This woman is more dangerous than Kearney.*

"I see Mr. Kearney going into the bank," Maybelle said. "I do hope he isn't in a bad temper. My husband is so sensitive. He's nervous about what he saw last night."

Hudkins chuckled, said sympathetically, "I'm sure he'll recover, Maybelle. But I'll postpone walking to the bank with you. I might make Kearney mad for sure."

She looked up at the sky. "Dave's buying me a pony from Mr. Kearney today. Tomorrow I'm going for a ride. Do you like to ride, Joe."

"I get enough when I work," he laughed. "Get Dave to ride with you."

Her laugh twinkled gayly, "Dave is a poor rider." She looked again at the sky, "But I love to ride."

He said awkwardly, "I've got some to do now. Maybe we'll meet again."

"I'm sure we will," she answered. She gave him another smile and went on down the street toward the bank. Hudkins breathed a sigh of relief. He was angry at himself for letting her excite him and the knowledge that she knew she could excite him made it worse. He made a mental resolution to watch his step with Maybelle. *She probably collects men*

like a trapper hunts hides, he thought. And he had more to do than chat with women.

* * *

TO JOE Hudkins, in the next two weeks, the temper of the valley changed like a piece of rawhide that's been soaked in water then let dry out in the sun changes. The nesters, barred from crossing Spade land by Kearney's orders and enforced by his punchers, drove the long way into town. Each night was an explosion night. Joe Hudkins tightened with the strain of waiting for an explosion that never came off—quite. And with the sour knowledge that neither faction trusted him.

Even the weather added to the tempers that laid just below the edge of a man's self control. The sun blistered the fields and the cattle bawled for water. The waterholes begun to dry up and the nesters strung more barb wire around the holes that cattle had drank from since the range had first been settled.

In front of Reiden's store, nesters clustered in a compact knot of overalled men and blue work shirts.

Hudkins watched them talk excitedly. He saw Bert Lane come out of the store and become the center of the group. A gaunt farmer slapped Lane on the back and his hoarse laugh rolled across the street.

Pete Willis said, "That's a real laugh, Joe. The first I've heard in two weeks."

"I think I'll see what it's about," Hudkins said. He got up from the desk."

"You miss talking to Lane and his kid, don't you," Pete Willis probed.

Hudkins said dryly, "Damn you, Pete. How'd you know that?"

"I saw the kid coming back from Box Canyon," Pete said. "He kinda asked about you."

None of the faces were friendly as Hudkins approached the group. He thought bitterly, *They don't trust me,* and the knowledge hurt. He asked Lane, masking his emotions, "How's Tommy, Bert?"

"All right," Lane answered shortly.

"Go ahead, Bert," somebody in the crowd said. "Tell 'im about it."

"About what?" Hudkins asked.

Bert Lane said softly with a note of excitement in his voice. "We've got a driller coming in. Oughta be here in a couple of days according to this letter I just got."

"That's fine," Hudkins agreed heartily. "I guess you can all use more water."

"And by gosh we're gonna drill 'em," a winkled farmer with work worn face and worried lines in his face said. "This dry spell is ruinin' us. We bin hurt bad as it is."

"This hurts the valley," Hudkins said. "The cattle need water."

"Taint enough water holes," the old farmer said. "Let the cattlemen do their own worrying."

Lane said bitterly, "Kearney can drill holes for them."

"Ha," the old man said. "Not him. He doesn't give a damn about anybody but Kearney." He chuckled. "And most of his water holes are dry. That's all he gits is dry holes."

"I wish I'd never left Indiana," another farmer said. He was a middle-aged man and soft spoken. "It either burns us out, freezes us out or floods us out here."

The old timer looked at the sky. He scuffed dust with the toe of his worn shoe. "I think it's building up to rain soon. My bones feel it."

Lane grinned. "Come out sometime, sheriff." He fidgeted. "I guess I sort of went haywire blaming you for puttin' me in jail. Tommy misses those stories of yours. He does like hers."

"Whose stories?" Hudkins asked quickly.

Lane's face became colored. He said awkwardly, "Mrs. Collins. Tommy's met her out riding and she's told him stories."

"I tell you we're gonna have rain," the voice of the old timer covered up Lane's confusion. "I remember one time when I homesteaded down in Arizona and—"

"Aw, Ed," the guy from Indiana said. "I don't think it'll rain here again, ever."

Hudkins said, "I'll ride out tomorrow, Bert. And good luck when you drill."

He turned and left the knot of nesters, feeling better. He heard someone say. "Yuh think it'll cause trouble Bert?"

Lane's voice replied, "We'll be fixed for it, when the rig gets here."

4

OLD timer was right, Joe Hudkins thought sourly the next day. The storm caught him halfway between town and Lane's farm. There was a sudden drop in the temperature; then a soft breeze, gentle as a woman's sigh at first, that ruffled the burnt wheat in the fields and brought the smell of rain. He debated turning back to town, decided to push ahead and rode faster.

Cattle began to drift as he rode past Spade range, toward the shelter of cottonwoods, sere and yellow. Against the far off peaks, thunder rumbled and then lightning forked across the horizon. It was dark now, the sun hidden behind layers of greasy clouds; Joe felt the first drops pelt down.

No man in his right senses would be out in this storm, he thought. But it wasn't far now to Lane's place and the afternoon was already changing into evening.

Wind whipped dust across the road and Hudkins' big grey laid his ears back. Hudkins hit Lane's farm just as the sky opened and water came down in solid sheets. The house and barn became dim objects in front of him; before he could get the grey inside the barn, both were soaked.

"Hey, Joe!" It was Bert Lane and his voice shook.

Hudkins noted the fear in the nester's voice. He moved fast, stripping the big grey, wiping him down with a blanket and turned toward the house. Water drenched him again before he reached the porch. Bert Lane stood with his hands gripping the post and his face was white.

"Did you see Tommy?" his voice trembled.

"No," Hudkins answered. "Let's get inside. You look sick."

Lane grunted. "Broke a leg." He broke off as Hudkins helped him inside the house. A fire was going and the heat felt good. Joe helped Lane lay down on a bunk.

"Did Tommy go for a doctor?" Hudkins asked. "I didn't pass anybody on the road to town."

Lane moved restlessly. "Tommy left before the accident. He wanted to visit the ruins in Box Canyons so he'd have something to show you." Lane pointed at a letter on the table. "He's selling the stuff to some curio dealer back East." He winced. "I was hoisting a timber up in the loft when the block and tackle gave way; I've been waiting for Tommy ever since."

Hudkins went to the door, opened it; the draft nearly jerked it out of his hand. Water covered the ground. He shut the door and tried to keep the worry in his mind out of his voice. *After all,* he thought, *Tommy might have left the canyon before the flash-flood*—but on the other hand. Lane's voice broke into his chain of thoughts.

"Damn this leg," Lane said irritably. He looked questioningly at Hudkins. "Maybe if you propped me up in the saddle—" he left it unfinished.

"Where's your slicker?" Hudkins asked. No use risking Bert Lane's life in a storm like this. "Tommy's probably made it to some neighbors but I'll take a look see." He tried to keep his voice casual; Box Canyon could be a death-trap in a flash-flood like this.

Relief shone in Lane's eyes. "He's probably safe," he agreed, "But I've got to know."

LANE wasn't the only man to worry, Hudkins thought as he stepped outside with Lane's slicker buttoned high around his neck. The wind whipped the breath out of his lungs, brought tears into his eyes. His feet sank into the ooze of mud that covered the corral as he crossed it

and reached the shelter of the barn. His big grey looked at him when Hudkins led the pony to the barn door. The animal laid his ears back and tried to back up.

Hudkins forced the pony out of the door and into the full fury of the storm. Rain stung like buckshot. Joe realized that if he didn't get Tommy out of Box Canyon before long there would be no chance of forcing a way into it. A picture flashed into his mind of a small boy scrambling around, trying to climb higher than the water and he urged the big grey.

Hudkins rode by instinct. The swirl of water blotted out the landmarks. Thoughts swirled inside him; it was too late to stop and hunt for more riders to help him. He thought of Bert Lane, crippled with his leg, worrying about his son and he tried to make the grey go faster. He found a dozen gullies that had been dry but were now bankful of water and the grey lunged across. Water soaked Hudkins to his knees; he rode grimly, hunched forward in the saddle.

It was so dark that Joe rode into the midst of a group of riders before he could see them. Men surrounded him and he recognized then the bulk of Pat Kearney's body. Lightning ripped the sky and he saw the gaunt face of Slim Watterson and beside them a small figure, nearly lost in a huge slicker that dropped below his stirrups. It was Dave Collins.

"It's Joe Hudkins," a voice said and Hudkins recognized the voice of Sam Torrmant. "You hunting her, Joe?"

"Hunting whom?" Hudkins asked. He thought fast. "How'd you know Tommy Lane was missing?"

"It's my wife," Dave Collins cut in. His voice was thin and shaky. "She's caught out here somewheres."

Pat Kearney cut in. "Glad we found you, Joe." He rubbed his chin. "Maybelle should have been back hours ago; we needed you to help hunt for her. I've got all my riders out." He halted a moment, suspicious in his voice. "What the devil's Bert Lane's kid doing?"

"Bert thinks Tommy's trapped in Box Canyon," Hudkins replied. He wondered what the tone in Kearney's voice meant, then dismissed it. "Some of you men come with me."

"We're hunting my wife," Dave Collins said, and the meekness was gone from his voice.

"She's probably taken shelter somewhere," Hudkins suggested. "After all she's a grown woman and a good rider."

Kearney said testily, "She's an Easterner, sheriff."

"And Tommy Lane's only a kid," Hudkins replied. A touch of anger rode his words. "A couple of you men ride with me."

"Damn if they will," Kearney interrupted. "We're hunting Maybelle Colins. Damn these nester brats; let 'em look out for their own." He edged his horse forward.

Hudkins felt his face redden with anger. He blocked Kearney with his grey. "I say you're splitting; Mrs. Collins is an expert rider."

"She's my wife," Dave Collins cut in and his voice was harsh. "These men are helping me hunt her. Let's go, boys."

HUDKINS continued to block the way. Kearney growled, "We're going ahead even if we have to ride over you, Hudkins."

Hudkins ignored him. A new thought surged inside him. He turned to Sam Torrmant. "You've got a kid, Sam," he said softly—"just about the same age as Tommy. How about it, Sam?"

Sam Torrmant said, "I think Hudkins is right, Kearney. Any woman should have sense enough to seek shelter in a storm like this. A kid's a kid."

"I'll remember this, Sam," Kearney shouted.

Sam Torrmant said, "I'm pulling my boys out, Kearney; we're riding with the sheriff."

Kearney mumbled but the roar of the storm drowned out his oaths. He splashed around Hudkins followed by Dave Collins and Slim Watterson.

In a matter of moments the night swallowed them.

Sam Torrmant said, "You'd think it was Kearney's wife that was lost, 'stead of Collins." he pulled the collar of his slicker about his throat tighter. "They search funny. We passed a couple of houses and they didn't even stop to look." He turned his pony around, "Is the kid trapped in Box Canyon?"

"Bert Lane thinks so," Hudkins answered slowly. There was something odd about Kearney's determination to continue hunting for Maybelle Collins.

"They passed up a couple of houses," Hudkins repeated under his breath. Then a thought hit him with a wallop that made him rein up the grey. The other riders bunched in on him. Kearney's remarks came back to him then, *"I think Collins would kill any man she looked at."*

"What's the matter?" Torrmant asked.

But Tommy Lane! Hudkins thought of the kid and swayed. After all it was only a fear, a thought based on nothing solid that made him suddenly afraid of dapper Dave Collins. But Tommy's danger was real. He said, "Sam."

"Yeah," Sam Torrmant answered. "You got a hunch?"

"I might find Tommy," Hudkins picked his words slowly, "But I can't pass up Box Canyon."

Sam Torrmant said gruffly, "I've got enough men to hunt all through Box Canyon if we get there in time. You want a man with you?"

Hudkins wondered if the relief he felt showed in his voice. "No, Sam; if you find him or not head for Lane's house anyway."

"Sure," Torrmant replied. "Me and the boys'll fetch him back if we find him." He whistled, "These kids! But I guess I gave my dad some grey hairs in my time." He led his riders toward Box Canyon.

Hudkins whipped around. The hunch that had been faint became a cold fear that made him shiver. Water seeped around his neck, ran cold fingers down his back. The grey splashed water.

JOE HUDKINS had made his decision on the spur of the moment. The little pieces that composed his hunch began to take shape slowly. Pat Kearney had been definite. He shuddered, thinking of Bert Lane and his broken leg. If Kearney had a scheme, this was the night to pull it. He pictured Kearney, rubbing his chin and smiling with cold satisfaction; Joe set his lips grimly, forgot the icy water trickling down his back. He had to make it to Lane's in time.

The light from Lane's farmhouse was a cheery yellow against the blackness. Three horses were outside, their rumps turned to the wind, miserable in the wet. There was no sign of their riders.

Hudkins came up slowly, aware that his hunch had been right. He led the grey into the shelter of the barn and the grey pricked its ears up. Lightning crashed outside and he saw a black mare, skin still wet, in a stall. He felt excitement course through him. That mare belonged to Maybelle Collins.

There was still no sign of life on the outside of the Lane house. He made his way through the mud to a side window. A curtain that failed to touch the bottom of the window let him peek inside. Hudkins saw a big, squarely shaped back facing him. It was Pat Kearney.

Bert Lane laid stretched out in a chair, his broken leg supported by a stool. His face looked gaunt.

One thing puzzled Hudkins, made him scowl in the darkness. What did Kearney plan to pull, and where did Maybelle fit into it? He searched the room again. He saw Dave Collins, in one corner, his face tight and narrow. Slim Watterson stood with his arms behind him, his eyes on Bert Lane. There was no sign of Maybelle. He pressed his ear against the pane of glass but the roar of the storm drowned out the mumble of voices in the room.

Hudkins muttered thanks that he'd been to Lane's often enough to know where the back door was. He picked

his way around the side of the house, tried the knob. The door swung open easily. The room was dark, only a crack of light coming underneath the door that led to the front of the house.

Water puddled on the floor from his slicker. He eased it off, laid it in one corner behind the kitchen stove.

Lane had been a good carpenter and had built the house big enough for a family. Hudkins stood still, figuring the layout in his mind. The voices made a faint hum in his ears.

It was Lane's voice that he heard first and the words trembled with anger. "She's not here I told you that. Now get out!"

"Then it won't hurt if we just look around." The voice was crisp, deadly with intent. Hudkins, listening frowned. It wasn't Kearney's deep voice, nor Slim Watterson's slow drawl. He started. The voice had been that of Dave Collins.

HUDKINS moved out of the kitchen, thankful the front room was not in direct line with the kitchen. He thought of the black mare in the barn and the whole thing stood clear in his mind. Maybelle Collins was in the house and Bert Lane was in danger. He wondered for a brief moment if Lane was guilty, then dismissed it.

The two bedrooms ran off from a narrow hallway. He stepped inside the first room. It was empty.

The second room was dark. He stood silent. Then it came to him, the smell of perfume and powder and a whispered voice said, "Is that you, Dave? Hurry up. I'm getting cold."

A figure moved toward him. Hudkins slapped a hand over a mouth and teeth bit him to the bone. He held her tight, knowing that it was Maybelle Collins that he held and suddenly he realized something new there was no thrill in holding her now. She struggled, trying to create commotion.

Joe handled her like a bag of potatoes, aware of her deadliness. When he had gagged her and tied her up in a sheet taken from the bed, he wiped sweat from his face.

He took a chance and struck a match. The glow showed the set-up; Maybelle had just enough clothes off to justify a husband shooting the other man on sight. He let the match go out, feeling sick. Killing in the heat of anger he could understand. But this—he choked with a sudden spasm of anger. This was something rotten; the whole Lane farm wasn't worth going to this trouble for—unless—unless something that didn't show up easily was at the bottom of it. He heard Pat Kearney's rumbling voice again and his hand tested the slide of his Colt from the holster on his hip. Whatever prompted this, it must be big.

He was aware now that the thunder had eased off outside and only the patter of rain running from the roof of the house made any noise.

"I haven't been blind," Dave Collins' raspish voice said. "I've seen how you looked at my wife."

Hudkins risked a peek through the bedroom door. Collins had a bump under his armpit that meant he carried a gun. The meek look that he wore in the bank was gone his face quivered.

"Damn you!" Bert Lane tried to get up from his chair. "Get out."

"That's not hospitable," Kearney gave an ugly laugh. "It's wet outside."

Dave Collins' nose twitched. "I swear I can smell her perfume, Pat." His beady eyes glittered. "Maybe you're right, Lane; maybe she didn't come here to get out of the storm." He paused, "She came here to meet you, Lane."

"You're crazy," Lane blurted out.

"Maybe I am," Collins replied. "Crazy enough to kill the man who ruins her reputation—and mine."

AGAIN Lane tried to get out of his chair. Pat Kearney shoved him back, said roughly, "And we're witnesses, me and Slim; we had some more but that damn sheriff took them off a goose chase after your kid."

Behind him, Hudkins heard a thump. He whipped around; Maybelle kicked again and the sound carried.

He saw Dave Collins jerk about and Pat Kearney motioned toward the bedrooms.

"I'm searching the house," Collins grated. "If she isn't here what's her mare doing in your barn?"

Lane's eyes widened. "That's a damn lie."

Dave Collins walked over, slapped him in the mouth.

Lane spat blood. His voice was hoarse. "What's back of all this, Kearney." He tried again to get up. Kearney shoved him roughly back.

"Tell him, Pat," Dave Collins said. He edged toward the hallway. "Maybe Lane will relish it."

Kearney laughed hoarsely. "You've been raising wheat on a sea of oil, Lane." His voice shook with excitement. "Oil! Your place floats on it and it's going to be mine. All of it!"

Hudkins watched the scene. It all made sense now; Kearney had been forced into action by the nearness of Lane's getting an out-of-town rig to drill for water. He understood now why Kearney had refused to drill anywhere but on Spade land and the ugliness of his disappointment when all he found was dry holes and water. Kearney wanted Lane's farm all right. But voices came again and he broke off his thoughts.

"So that's why you jerked your rig off my place and refused to come back," Lane snapped. "But it won't work, Kearney; the rig I'm hiring will strike oil."

Again Kearney shouted with laughter. "You're not getting anything, Lane. Collins will never be convicted by any jury for killing the man who ruined his wife."

Sweat popped out on Lane's forehead. Hudkins rubbed the palm of his gun hand on his shirt. This was it, he knew. Kearney could never let him go on living.

"That's right," Collins said from the edge of the hallway. "No jury will convict me." He giggled.

Bert Lane said softly, "Only one thing wrong, gents. Collins' wife isn't here."

Collins said slowly, "But she is, Lane—she is."

5

DAVE Collins had a lock of hair out of place. He reached up with a well manicured hand, swept it back into place. "It's time I did the job you hired us for," he said; "I'm sick of working in your bank. Maybelle and I are anxious to get out of this damn Valley."

Hudkins wiped sweat from his brow. Collins, he knew now, was an imported killer. Kearney had laid his plans carefully. Lane's life would be forfeit it Joe failed now; he wet his lips, watched Dave Collins cross the entrance into the hallway and step into the opposite bedroom.

Collins came out in a minute. He called to Kearney. "I'll look in this one; that was empty." There was sureness in his words.

Collins was a showoff. He stopped in front of the door and Hudkins held his breath. Collins reached in a pocket and brought out a match. He scratched it against the door jamb, stepped inside.

Hudkins blew hard. The match fluttered, went out but Collins had seen the lumpy figure of Maybelle on the floor and his mouth slacked open.

There was no pity in Hudkins for the killer. Collins moved forward, eyes on the spot where Maybelle lay, and his fingers reached for another match. When Dave whipped around toward a softly closing door, Hudkins struck hard, the barrel of his Colt thudding against Collins' head. The dapper killer went down.

It was deadly silent in the room. Hudkins felt Collins' pulse. The little man was out cold for the time being. He moved toward the door again, aware that Pat Kearney was talking.

"You blind fool," Kearney exulted. "Me and Slim stole just enough cattle so it looked like nesters stealing for beef and we drove cattle through nesters fences to make 'em hate each other."

"Yah," Slim Watterson spoke for

the first time. "I planted that hide on your farm the night of the dance, Lane."

"Collins is taking his time," Kearney grated. "So hurry up, Slim."

Slim Watterson spoke slowly, "Boss, I—I don't like this I've done a lot of rotten things in my life but nothin' like this."

"To hell with what you like," Kearey shouted. "I've enough on you to hang you a dozen times. Go in and hurry up Collins."

Watterson moved toward the door, dislike for the job he had written in his bony face. Hudkins moved back a bit. Watterson was a fast man with a gun.

"Hey, you," Watterson said, "Come on, Collins."

"Go in you fool!" Kearney roared. "We haven't got all night. We know she's in there; we slipped her in the window ourselves."

Watterson kicked the door open, barged in.

Maybelle screamed, "Hudkins is here!"

WATTERSON was cat-quick. He jumped back into the hallway and fired on the move. The slug breezed past Hudkins, shattered the bedroom glass.

Hudkins cursed himself for not having put a better gag on Maybelle. He crowded out on top of Slim; Slim fired again and a hammer smashed into Hudkins' shoulder. He squeezed the trigger of his Colt. Slim howled, grabbed the upper part of his arm and his sixgun crashed to the floor. He dove for it as Kearney came up fast and when he bent over Hudkins muttered to himself, "To hell with being nice about it."

He kicked, and his foot met the point of Slim's chin; Slim sprawled out on the floor. In the bedroom Maybelle raised the roof with her screams.

Kearney charged in. Maybelle's screams hit a new pitch and Kearney, unnerved and excited by the screams missed his first shot.

The door of the bedroom was open now and Kearney's second shot ripped into Hudkins' shoulder, skidded him toward the kitchen.

They aim to kill me, Hudkins thought. The jolt tore the Colt from his hand. He dove after it.

Kearney levelled with his gun. He shouted, "I'll claim Lane shot you," and his laugh filled the hallway.

Maybelle screamed again and Hudkins saw Kearney's gun muzzle center on him. His own Colt was only inches away from his hand but Kearney slid out a foot and kicked it away. He chuckled as he did so.

Hudkins thought bitterly, *He's enjoying this,* and the thought made him bitter. There was the crash of an overturned chair from the front room and just for an instant Kearney's glittering eyes swung toward the front room.

It was Bert Lane, crawling toward the peg that held his gunbelt. Kearney hesitated between his choice of targets.

But the pause had been long enough. Hudkins shouted, "Kearney!" and the weight of his gun felt good to his hand.

Kearney heeled around.

Maybelle screamed as Dave Collins staggered out of the dark bedroom into the brightness of the lamp lit hall. He had a short-barrel gun in his hand and blood dribbled over Kearney and Hudkins.

Kearney's shot, meant for Hudkins, hit Collins in the chest. Dave skidded into Hudkins and Joe shoved the dapper man smack into Kearney. Kearney stumbled backwards, the white hands of Dave Collins grabbing at him for support. Hudkins shot slowly and deliberately and Kearney quivered. His knees buckled, his mouth gaped open and his eyes widened with realization. He was dead when he hit the floor.

MAYBELLE'S screams filled the house. Now; Hudkins sucked in a deep breath. For a moment he felt dizzy.

At first he thought the storm had began again but then he saw Bert Lane crawl toward the front door and reach up for the knob. The door opened and men, their slickers black and wet with rain, rushed in.

(Continued On Page 95)

Ma Jackson believed in her hunches, and a hunch told her that this Lem Hanley wasn't what he pretended to be — and he didn't pretend to be very good . . .

"You get that doctor, pronto!" Ma told Lem.

MA JACKSON and the FULL HOUSE

by ARCHIE JOSCELYN

(Author of "Temper Of Steel")

"Oh, the old broken bucker,
The iron-bound bucker,
The hoss-covered bucker
That bangs in the well—"

MA JACKSON was happy. Her voice rose, sotto-voce and subdued, so that it could be heard hardly more than a mile away, while her team of cayuses jerked the rickety buckboard at a stretching trot across the roadless pastures. Abruptly she broke off, shaking her head, and the effect was as though rumbling thunder had muttered away to silence. "Kind of a pretty tune, but whoever wrote them words sure didn't know much—special about buckin' horses," she sighed. "And why they'd let a cayuse go to kickin' the well to pieces—"

Again she left the thought unfinished, her attention newly attracted to a fresh part of the sprawling 7-Bar range. As manager of the big ranch, both for the eastern syndicate which owned a three-fifths interest, and for herself with the remaining shares, Ma Jackson made it a point to keep thoroughly familiar with what went on everywhere across these acres at all times. Right now, something struck a discord.

Off more than a mile was a bunch of sleek-looking cattle, about a hundred in all. At this distance they looked to be what they should be—the pure-blooded herd which was Ma's special hobby, her pride and joy. These were as extra special as gilt on the lily. The syndicate had looked on the venture with a dubious eye, but Ma had built the bunch up until now these hundred head were worth virtually as much as the regular herd of several times that number.

"Kind of a shame I got to sell them," Ma ruminated aloud. "But that Stokes feller made a mighty good offer when he wrote, and if he likes 'em when he looks 'em over, it'll be a good deal. Next year, I'll have me a bigger'n better bunch than ever."

But that was day-dreaming, and the obtrusive fact which had caught Ma's attention in the first place was that these cattle were in the wrong place, the wrong part of this field. They could have drifted there, across the miles of their own accord—and it was likely that they had. Still, something told Ma that this was wrong; it was a hunch, and she believed in hunches.

Ordinarily, her philosophy in such a case was that there was nothing like a look-see, as she termed it. She was half-swinging the team, when a drop of rain, roughly the size of a marble, spattered off her nose. Clouds had been building a dark castle for themselves across the west, and the wind, wailing in dolorous warning for the last hour, was now springing out in full-throated roar like a hound dog after a surprised cat. The full blast of it almost drove the breath from her lungs.

Regretfully, Ma gave the ponies their head and let them run toward the home ranch buildings, some four miles away. That way, the wind was at their back, but even so she saw, she would probably get wet before reaching shelter. The storm had come up fast in the last few minutes.

"And it'll be a bum-dinger," she decided. "I'll have to look that bunch over later, an' get them chased back to their own bed mounds." She let the horses run, even though the buckboard, spinning now on three wheels, now on two, seemed in imminent danger of upsetting or complete collapse. Ma reveled in this sort of thing. The jouncing was comfortably absorbed by her ample padding, and her ancient Stetson, with the disconsolate red ostrich feather leaning back in the wind, seemed to defy the storm.

NEARING the buildings, Ma sighted a pair of fleeing figures on horseback, likewise scudding for shelter, and her mood lightened again like that of a playful elephant. "Love's young gleam," she muttered. "And they been moonin' same as me, only dif'rent. And near got caught too. Not that they'd know the diff'rence."

For the last few weeks she had been viewing, with mixed emotions, this

unfolding of romance beneath her eyes. It had all started with the arrival of her niece, Pansy, fresh from the east, for a visit of uncertain duration. Pansy was an eye-filling girl of eighteen, and she had been enraptured with the west—particularly with that embodiment of the cowboy spirit as represented by Lem Hanley.

Hanley was handsome; there was no question of that. So were most weeds, or a drone bee. So was an outlaw horse, generally. Hanley had been an addition to the ranch which Ma hadn't expected—and nagging subject of doubt, even when she tried her best to like him.

He had arrived on the same stage with Pansy, having traveled the last two hundred miles with her, and it was apparent from the first to Ma Jackson's not-too-pleased eyes that he had been making hay while the sun shone. Already it was "Pansy" and "Lem" between them, and when Hanley had somewhat diffidently applied for a job, Pansy had raptly seconded the idea.

The clincher had been a letter of recommendation from Shoebutton Hobbs, who represented the syndicate from his desk. Shoebutton had declared that he was impressed with this young man's appearance—. "He'd think a skunk was pretty," Ma had snorted under her breath. "Also I am sure he will prove to be a good worker and a competent all-around hand, Ma." Shoebutton had finished. "Please put him to work if you can."

"If I can's' a good word," Ma had thought. "Gettin' work out of these fellers that like to show their muscles is twicet as hard as doing it yourself."

In the ensuing weeks, her feelings had remained mixed. Hanley was a good enough cow-hand—she'd seen better, and worse. Mostly, as she had expected, he was conceited and lazy. Presuming on his friendship for Pansy, he shirked when he could, and offered suggestions and comments which were frequently irksome. Everything about the 7-Bar—including Ma Jackson, as he more than implied—was obsolete and wrong. The only progressive deal was that herd of blooded stock; he approved of that.

Lem had suggested to Pansy that if *he* were foreman, a big improvement would soon be noticable, that it was too much for a woman like Pansy's aunt to try and act as foreman of such an outfit herself. Pansy had been sold on the idea.

Ma had not, but she had concealed her irritation for the sake of Pansy and because of Shoebutton. After all, romance was a pretty thing, and it reminded her wistfully of her own departed Larry.

The scales had finally been tipped in Lem's favor by the arrival of his little orphaned brother for a visit. He'd requested permission for Tommy to come for a few days, and Ma had readily agreed. Tommy was ten, thin and pinched and half-scared looking, completely strange to a ranch. But eager and just about everything which Lem was not. Ma had been won instantly, and had mothered Tommy ever since; good food and fresh air and riding a horse had done wonders already. Because of him, Ma looked with a kindlier eye on Lem. A man with a brother like Tommy must have some good in him.

"Even if it don't meet the eye," she sighed. "But then, they say beauty's only chin deep."

SOAKED to the skin now, Ma stabled her own horses, then went on to the house, barging in gustily with a blast of the storm. "Be a real rain, 'fore it finishes," she volunteered. "I saw you kids high-sailin' it for home—why, what's the trouble?"

"It's Tommy," Pansy blurted, turning a stricken face to her. Tommy had won Pansy's heart as well. "He's sick!"

He was sick, there was no doubt of that. In the hours that Ma had been out on the range, fever had replaced the healthy glow in the cheeks just beginning to fill out, and the look of him, wan and ill frightened Ma. Never having had a boy of her own, this waif had filled a vacant place in her heart.

"You ride for a doctor," she com-

manded Hanley, and, seeing the hesitant look he cast at the downpour, added grimly. "And see you get him here on the double-lick!"

Hanley about to demur, met Ma's eye and obeyed. Shiftless, the cook, sidled through the door. "I made a fresh blueberry pie," he suggested. "Just in case—"

"Scat," Ma snapped. "He's too sick for pie, can't you see that? Though I guess you meant good, far's ye know," she added, relenting, and crossed to the bed. "Don't you fret, Tommy," she soothed, cradling the boy on her ample lap. "We'll have you out chasin' cows again in a few days an' pickin' buttercuts."

Tommy threw his arms around her neck. "You're so good to me, Ma," he sobbed. "Ain't nobody ever been that way to me before, like you are."

Touched, Ma tucked him into bed and did what she could. When the doctor finally arrived, she listened grimly to his report.

"It's scarlet fever," he said. "And that means that you'll all be under quarantine here, as well as the boy.'

* * *

For the first few days, nursing Tommy, the quarantine meant nothing much to Ma. But as the boy began to improve, and she wanted to get to town, it proved irksome. Ma hitched her team to the buckboard and rode out on the range.

At a coulee she left them to stand, as they had been trained to do, while she moved down its brushy length to inspect a water hole. Near the spring she paused, at the sound of voices from close ahead, though brush hid the speakers from her view. But without seeing them, they were both familiar. One voice was that of Lem Hanley; the other belonged to Cass Richter, owner of the neighboring Box B Ranch, and long-time thorn in the flesh.

"You've been doing a good job, so far," Richter was saying. "See that you keep it up."

"Trust me for that, Uncle Cass," Hanley returned. "Having the kid sick and that old battle-ax nursin' him instead of chasin' around all the time has helped plenty. And that reminds me, I got to be getting back to work; have to make a good impression."

Ma heard the two moving away. Presently, she retraced her own steps, heavily, to the buckboard. She gave no second thought to Hanley's opinion of herself, since she returned it in full measure. But the other term that she had overheard was revealing. Uncle Cass!

"I always suspicioned there was a wrong smell about that hyena," she muttered to herself. "Uncle Cass! Now I know it! And him makin' up to Pansy! Moonlight an' romance! Moonshine and ratsbane!"

Deeply troubled, she returned to the buildings. If it wasn't for Tommy—but Tommy was Hanley's brother, and her heart had gone out to the little tyke. Tommy complicated the sort of direct action which she would normally take.

* * *

SHE WAS met at the door by Shiftless, whose lugubrious face looked more like that of a lost hound than usual.

"Boy seems to be feelin' worse," he reported. "He jus' lays there an' blubbers! Can't make out if it's the stomache-ache, or what."

Ma hurried in. Tommy lifted a woebegone face, but shrank away as Ma gathered him in her arms. Then he sobbed openly as she tried to soothe him.

"There there, Tommy," Ma crooned. "It'll be all right. Where does it hurt? Tell me."

"It don't hurt. It ain't that," Tommy protested. "I feel fine—only I—I'm such a skunk!"

"You ain't no such thing. Now what's this all about?"

She wiped his tears, and he faced her miserably. "You're going to hate me, Ma, and—and seems like I can't s-stand that," he gasped. "But I—I sure hate myself. I got to tell you. You been so good to me. And everybody tryin' to get you in trouble—"

"You're talkin' about Lem Hanley and Cass Richter, ain't you?" Ma asked shrewdly.

Tommy stared at her, surprised.

"How did you know?"

Ma shook her head like a defiant stallion. "You was speakin' of skunk," she said. "And what else does that add up to? Now tell me all about it."

Told, it was simple enough. Lem Hanley was Cass Richter's nephew, and it had been Richter's notion to plant him on the 7-Bar in the first place, to cause trouble. It had not been too difficult to get a recommendation from the unsuspicious Shoebutton Hobbs.

"Easy to pull the sheep over his eyes," Ma grunted. "Somebody lift their elbers with him a few times, and that'd do it."

For a while, with the added luck of Pansy falling for Hanley's charms, everything had seemed to work to Lem's advantage; but he had been shrewd enough to perceive soon that he was not making much headway with Ma Jackson. Cass Richter had supplied the answer: bring in a small, appealing kid brother, and win Ma's heart through the relationship.

The lack of a brother had been no bar. Cass Richter had found an orphan in the city, and Tommy, already accustomed to making his own way against heavy odds, had jumped at the chance to have a visit in the country, plenty to eat and to be paid for it as well. Ethics had not entered into the deal on either side.

But Tommy had discovered new values on the 7-Bar, hitherto undreamed of. A small boy's heart had been touched by Ma's kindness and motherliness. Now he had suffered a complete change of viewpoint.

"I—I just had to tell you, Ma, even if you do hate me," he sobbed. "I—I'll go, but I'll always remember how good you was to me. I couldn't let it go on any longer; I don't know what they're up to, but they're plannin' somethin' to make a lot of trouble for you."

"That ain't nothin' new with Cass Richter," Ma retorted grimly. "But I don't hate you, Tommy; you're going to make a real cowboy, and you're going to stay right here on the 7-Bar and help me run it!"

"Oh, Ma! And help you run them polecats off'n it?"

"You bet," Ma agreed. "Though, for the present—you just don't act like anything had happened. Not even around Hanley."

MA EXUDED confidence, but it dropped from her like a cloak when she was off by herself. She had had a vague hunch for a long time that something was wrong. But what was going on? She had to know, and Ma had a feeling that time was working against her.

That evening Ma watched Hanley with shrewd attention, and was relieved to see that the glamor of his first appearance seemed to be fading with Pansy. Apparently the girl was begining to see through the glitter to the sham beneath. That was encouraging, but it gave no answer to the question of what Cass Richter was up to.

The next day Ma Jackson deliberately sent Hanley on a mission which would take him conveniently close to the Box B, and herself contrived to be where she might again hear and see should there be another meeting. Luck was with her; apparently something new had developed overnight, which the two conspirators wanted to talk over.

"I got word from town today," Cass Richter reported gleefully. "Stokes is coming tomorrow to look over Ma Jackson's blooded herd; it couldn't be better."

"Yeah, she'll sure be surprised when she shows him that herd, and they turn out to common ordinary critters, not purebreds at all," Hanley agreed. "She's never suspicioned a thing, so far. Though I don't think she's had a look at them since they was shifted."

"She wouldn't notice anyway," Richter retorted. "I spent months huntin' out a hundred head that match those others in size and looks like twins. Only diff'rence is that they ain't blooded stock, and trust Stokes to know it soon as he sets eyes on them. That deal will be off, and she needs the money, I know. Like-

wise, Stokes will think she's tryin' to cheat him, pullin' a fast one, and he'll be mad enough to prosecute. I know him!"

"But you said he wouldn't."

"He will, 'fore we get through. The deal's sure to fall through in the first place. Man, I'd like to be there and see her face when she fnds out!"

"Why don't you? What's to hinder?"

"Maybe I will, at that," Richter agreed. "No reason why I shouldn't ride to have a look at such a fancy herd, when they're up for sale. Later on, when the real herd turns up on the 7-Bar again, we'll see that Stokes finds out and has a look; that will make it seem like Ma tried to palm off a fake bunch on him, and she'll really be in bad! She's made a fool of me plenty times in the past, and it's cost me a lot of money," he added vengefully. "Here's where I get back in full. And one of these days, I'll have the 7-Bar as well! See you tomorrow."

Richter strode off. Hanley stood for a minute longer, smiling to himself. "Mebby you'll have it, Uncle Cass," he muttered. "And mebby I'll sort of beat you to it! Anyway, it's workin' out fine for both of us, so far!"

He too, departed. Deeply thoughtful, Ma returned to her team and buckboard. She understood the scheme now, and remembered that herd which had seemed to be in the wrong place. Actually, with one thing and another, she hadn't had a chance to look them over since.

It was a clever scheme, and it might have worked. It probably would have, but for Tommy and the reaction of a little boy, long starved for love, who had responded to goodness and fairness when he saw it.

But what should she do now? she might, of course, tell Stokes that the deal was off, and if necessary explain why. But that would not be so good; this was Cass Richter's scheme, and he was neck-deep in it. Far better if he could be choked with his own rope.

"Where'll the real bunch be?" Ma ruminated. "Well, where would they be—'cept over on the Box B? And yet he don't aim to steal 'em—he ain't that big a fool. Aims to trade back right pronto, after tomorrow. Which means they can't be very far off; now, if I was a crook, where at would I hide them dogies?"

* * *

IT WAS evening when, in the saddle again for the first time in a long while, accompanied by Shiftless and Handsome, two whom she knew could be trusted fully, Ma led the way. They drove the bunch already on the 7-Bar with them, to use no waste motion. Ma eyed the hundred head almost admiringly.

"I'll have to say for Cass Richter that he done a good job," she conceded. "Sure matched these critters close with them others; they'd fool me if I didn't know better."

Her hunch had been correct; the other herd was off in a remote section but just about where she had counted on finding them. The swap was made without incident, and a little before dawn, weary but pleased, Ma crawled into her bed for an hour or so of sleep.

"Guess I won't have to count no sheep to get to sleep this time," she thought just before dropping off. "Just count the goats like Cass Richter. That works fine."

* * *

Stokes arrived on schedule. Accompanied by Handsome attired as usual in a flaringly yellow shirt which gave him, from off a little way, the look of a fried egg, Ma rode to look at the bunch. Presently they were joined by Hanley and Pansy, and, a little farther along, Ma was not surprised to see Cass Richter himself coming loping across.

"Mornin', Ma," he greeted, falsely jovial. "You're lookin' like a load of hay—to a bunch of hungry critters I mean. Mind if I ride over to have a look at that bunch of fine stock you have?"

"I guess I can stand it if the critters can," Ma said resignedly, and was more quiet than usual for the remainder of the journey. They found the

herd in good shape, and watching Richter, Ma could see that he was fooled by his own deception.

Stokes looked them over in careful silence for a while, his face telling nothing. Then he turned back, and Richter looked expectant. "I find them all that you said they'd be, Mrs. Jackson," Stokes conceded. "So we won't quibble about price. There's certainly nothing wrong here—though I was led to believe, by reports reaching me, that something might be amiss. It looks to me as though somebody had overreached themselves."

Ma said nothing, which for her, was unusual; she knew that the last of that remark had been meant for Cass Richter, and that he had been dropping hints, sure of what the outcome would be. Richter understood, at least in part. He was coming, belatedly, to realize that it was he who had been made a fool of. His ears reddened.

"Everything is fine," Stokes added. "Allow me to congratulate you, Ma!"

As that sunk in, confirming the failure of his carefully laid scheme, Richter's temper broke. He swung on Hanley.

"You bungling fool!" he snarled under his breath. "You're a fine one!"

"Who's a fool?" Hanley retorted angrily. "All I done was what you said—"

HE CAUGHT himself, clapping a hand over his mouth. Richter's words had been meant only for Hanley's ears, but Pansy had been watching and listening with a quiet intentness to match Ma Jackson's own. Now she nodded a dimpled chin decisively.

"So you've been doing what he said, have you?" she asked Hanley. "And I suppose you have a reason for that?"

There was silence for a moment, while Hanley's face paled and reddened and paled again, and his Adam's Apple jerked like a frog trying vainly to escape from a well. Richter looked unhappy, and Pansy followed up her advantage. "I think I could tell you the reason, if you don't feel like answering," she went on. "Oh, I know more about this than some folks give me credit for. And your uncle is right about one thing, Lem Hanley! Also, there's no room on the 7-Bar for a bungling fool—or a crook!"

Ma listened with approval. Pansy had spunk, and more good sense than she'd given her credit for. She looked at the hesitant Hanley and seconded the motion. "That's right," she agreed. "The place for you is with your Uncle Cass. Two of a kind makes a full house, eh?"

It was still not quite clear to Cass Richter just what had happened to him, or how—which fanned his rage to new heights, for he had sense enough to realize that he had been made the butt of his own scheme, and that everyone here knew his part in it. He seemed on the verge of apoplexy. . ."It'd be too full a house," he snarled. "There's no room for you on the Box B! Get out!"

"Not so fast," Hanley retorted, and the handsome mask of his face seemed gone in a snarl. "Want me to tell all I know—even to the sheriff? You'll give me a job, and like it! I—"

Ma smiled beatifically. "Let's go," she said. "With that sweet music ringin' in me ears, I could warble like the birdies meself. *'Oh, the old broken bucker'*—"

THE END

Watch for a "Two-Ton Tompkins" story

by Archie Joscelyn

THE CAT'S TROPHY

in our June issue

FRONTIER CORONER

by REX WHITECHURCH

(Author of "One Load For Old Judge Lynch")

A true account of the famous Doctor James Maddox

MR. JAMES T. Maddox traveled from Ohio in a covered wagon behind a pair of lumbering oxen, at the age of 32 years He was a tall, straight, dark-eyed man, not handsome; he could use a gun with great expertness, both the rifle and the pistol, and Wild Bill Hickok admitted that Maddox was about the fastest man on the draw he had ever seen. Dr. Maddox settled in Dodge City where he hung out his shingle. He was used to rough going, as he had worked on a farm for years to save enough money to attend medical school. He wore a stovepipe hat and

a white vest, and there was always a clean white handkerchief sticking out of his breast pocket. In a small holster on a narrow belt around his waist, so that it reposed on his tight hip, Dr. Maddox carried a revolver.

His professional career became quite colorful when he ran for the office of coroner and was elected. He had been in Dodge long enough so that he knew practically everyone, from Gabe Watson, the harness maker to Clara Hughes, the cook at the Dodge Hotel. In the first year he practiced in this wild trail town, he brought four babies into the world; yes, there were women in Dodge City then, too.

* * *

Dr. Maddox and Bill Hickok were warm personal friends. Doc was always on the scene of a killing; he had witnessed gunfights from his hotel room—he lived at the Dodge House—and he knew pretty well who was who in the gunfighter's game. Once Doc was kidnaped and hauled over twenty miles of rough trail country to perform a piece of surgery on a fugitive from justice. He had been taken by surprise. A soft knock on his bedroom door had brought immediate response from Doctor Maddox, as usual. A gun was thrust into his stomach and he was led downstairs, placed in a buckboard in the alley behind the hotel and driven to the owlhoot lair. Before he got there he was blindfolded, made to take an oath that he would never disclose what he was about to see; Doc took the oath with his fingers crossed.

The man who was wounded lay on a wall bunk. He had been shot in the back and the ball was not very deep in his chest. Doc probed it out and the owlhoot began to rest better. He was surprised when a man in the room said, "That's Wes Hardin, Doc. The only man that ever made Bill Hickok take water; he's going to kill Wild Bill when he gets well."

Doc stared at the men inquiringly, then said, "Well, that will be doing something very wrong; but I don't think there's a man in the world can kill Bill with Bill looking at him."

Doc returned to Dodge, hauled by the same man who had taken him to the lair. "We'll move before you can get a posse there," his companion said; "but you'd better not tell on us, Doc."

Doc said, "The next time I see you, stranger, you'd better go for that gun you got on you. I'm comin' shootin'."

The stranger goaded him with insults. "You couldn't hit the side of a barn. You don't know which end of a gun the bullet comes out of. You're joking, fella; you wouldn't have the guts."

* * *

THREE days later, Dr. Maddox saw a man leave a saloon. The physician was sitting in his hotel office window; he quickly put on his hat and walked out into the street.

"Go git your gun," the stranger said, laughing sarcastically when Doc began to march slowly toward him.

"I got it," Doc said. "Draw!"

Two guns flashed, but those who saw the fight said Doc beat the other in clearing leather. The bandit's gun went off but the bullet was driven into the ground. He never knew what hit him; he was shot right through the heart. In the swirl of dust Doc said. "Justifiable homicide."

That was the first time Dodge City had ever dreamed they had a fighting doctor in their midst. His fame grew from that moment on. When a group of men picked on a big Negro named Curtis Niley, a former slave, Doc saw the whole thing from his window, and when they were about to set Niley's breeches on fire with a torch they held at the cuff of his left leg, Doc jumped through his window with his gun flaming. The rowdies took fright and ran before they recovered from their shocked condition. Doc put the flames out, took Niley to his office and served him with his clever skill. Niley was badly burned around the left ankle.

Doc wouldn't take the money from a woman who wasn't able to pay for his services. In the case of a waitress in the hotel whose husband had run off and left her, she gave birth to a baby and Doc sat up all night with her; he never accepted a penny for

his work, although the girl had a hundred dollars in gold in her cabin.

Doc Maddox became so well known that he was offered big money to come to other places and practice; but he stayed in Dodge until he was ready to go back east, and in the two years he was coroner at Dodge, he covered more than four hundred death cases, gunfight victims, suicides and natural deaths. When he read of the death of Wes Hardin, who really was one of the worst killers the west had ever seen, he shuddered and said to his son, Raymond Maddox, who was a Pinkerton detective, "that's the meanest man I ever saw, although he never did anything but lay in his bunk while I operated on him. Durthe operation he rose off the bunk and pushed me away; but he fainted before I could get the bullet out of his chest. I believe he would have killed me if he had gotten to his feet."

* * *

Doc James Maddox died in 1906 at Dayton, Ohio. Some authorities have it that Doctor Maddox named Boothill. Dodge City snorted a weed covered cemetery at the north edge of town at the time, but it had no name. One day while Doc was attending a funeral where a man was being buried with his boots on, the physician said, "I guess this is what you'd rightfully call Boothill, this graveyard; he's the second man I've seen planted here with his boots on."

And it was called Boothill from then on, according to some historians.

Yes, he was a colorful figure, was Doc Maddox. When he was forty, he married Clarice Fersen, of Omaha, Nebraska, and she came west to live with him. Dodge City held a celebration and gave Doc a rousing sendoff. They fired guns and somebody dragged out an old Civil War cannon and fired a salute in his honor as the doctor rode down the main street, with his ravishing blonde bride, in a high-wheeled carriage.

But because of his wife's health, Doc soon left Dodge and returned to Ohio. But while his wife was a resident of Dodge, she was very popular and often helped Doc when he had a bad case of smallpox or measeles or anything like that, and was always with him when he was on a baby case.

Doc never forgot Dodge City, and when he died the western papers carried a long story about Doc's experience as coroner of the county. Dodge never forgot him either; despite big offers he'd received Doc never deserted this trail down that he had come to love.

THE END

In the big March issue

CRACK

DETECTIVE

STORIES

presents a

BRAND NEW COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

BULLETS FOR BALLOTS

by CLARENCE MULLEN

Now On Sale

This time Harley and the bully were shooting it out.

Shoot the Sucker

by COSMO BENNETT

(Author of "Cowboy, Call Your Shots!")

This Tip Harley seemed to be all bluff, and a pretty thin bluff at that: but as long as he was passing out free drinks, who cared?

THE LONG-LIMBED cowboy in brand new regalie from boots to ten-gallon head-covering appeared to be heavy with spinach. He let everyone in the smoke-filled saloon know that he had struck rich, and to prove it he had the bartender working up a sweat setting them up for the gang.

The stranger said he was Tip Harley. He could have just as well claimed to be the King of Siam so long as he continued to buy. And because he was buying and consuming a lot of liquid refreshment himself he could get away with an abnormal amount of bragging. He seemed like a right sort of hombre, with pleasant angular features, gray eyes that were a bit hazy now, and a lock of chestnut hair that keep slipping over his right eye. "Y'know," he claimed, swaying against the bar, "where I come from I'm the fastest man on th' draw. That's me—fashus man on th' draw."

He swayed some more and then jerked up his head. "Anybody here think he's pretty good."

A lean, dark-visaged gun-toter responded to the stir of interest and looks sent his way. He had been sitting back against the wall conferring with a shorter, pimple-faced companion. The dark-visaged one ambled up to the bar, thumbs thrust in his belt. "So, yore th' best in yore parts, huh?"

Tip Harley nodded. "Thash right. Me an' my pal, Red." He frowned. "Only Red ain't 'round any more. Had—an accident; that makes me the besh."

"Well, in these parts I'm pretty good. Name is Hogarth, Curley Hogarth. Strangers what talk big usually annoy me."

Hogart picked a partly emptied glass on the bar and threw its contents into Tip's face. Instantly a dozen of more bar flies scrambled. Harley shook his face and grinned. "Thash what I mean," he beamed. "Do that again. Go ahead."

Hogarth looked around the saloon with a bored look and then obliged with a second glass. This time Harley reached for his gun. He was still tugging when he found himself looking into a pair of guns held by Hogarth.

A sheepish grin spread over Tip's wind-tanned features and inspired jeers and cat calls throughout the saloon. Only the slightest pressure of a pair of trigger fingers separated Tip from instant death. The cold, steely eyes of Hogarth indicated no reluctance on his part to refrain from using this pressure—as he had against others.

"Got a new holster," explained Tip. "Kinda stiff. Lesh try again."

Hogarth obligingly holstered his shooting irons and this time slapped Tip smartly across the face. Tip was a little quicker in reaching this time, but again found himself facing a pair of .45's before he could draw.

Tip desisted. "Y're all right. Only one man was ever able to do that. My pal Red." He slapped Hogarth on the shoulder. "Lesh have a drink."

Hogarth threw off the hand, but his eyes sparkled as he studied the roll of fresh currency the drunken cowboy produced.

AFTER THAT round of drinks Tip moved away from the bar,

obviously deflated at having been so badly beaten on the draw. The pimply ex-tablemate of Hogarth's waylaid him. "Don't feel too bad," soothed the pimply one in a whining tone. "Hogarth's th' best there is on the draw. Y'r lucky t' be alive; he must be in a good humor."

Tip nodded and dropped into a chair and leaned over the grimy table in a confiding pose. He said, "Seein' as how he's in a good mood, how'd yuh like t' get even with him?"

Tip blinked and showed some interest, "How?"

"Ever play envelope poker? Bet you ain't 'cause it's new in these parts."

He took out some one-dollar bills and while Tip watched the pimply one sorted them out and then put them in an envelope.

"Here's the game," he explained. "Every bill has a serial number. Before I pull each one out you guess whether that number is odd or even. For each one you gues right, I pay you a buck. For ev'ryone wrong—y' pay me a buck."

Tip blinked. "Okay. Thash pretty good. It's fifty-fifty."

So Tip began to guess. Out of the ten bills he guessed only four correctly. But the pimply one refused the money. "Now let me guess."

"Okay," agreed Tip eagerly, "but lesh make it five bucks a guess."

A hungry gleam came into the eyes of the pimply one, but he glanced past Tip and then shook off the temptation. "Let's wait," he grumbled.

The pimply one guessed—and guessed correctly ten out of ten."

Tip scowled. "That beats any luck I ever saw. Only one with that kinda luck was my old pal, Red. Only Red's luck ran out on him. He—met with an accident."

The pimply one licked his lips. "Yeah—well, this warn't luck. Look, I said I'd do yuh a favor. I didn't take yuh five bucks a card like I coulda. Look, I tore a corner off the envelope. That's 'cause each bill's got a letter. Accordin' to the alphabet they're odd or even."

"They are?"

"Yeah. So while I seem t' be guessin' I'm sayin 't' myself, '*A*—*odd*, *B*—even, *C*—odd," until I hit the letter. I can't loose."

"What d'ya know?" excalimed Tip. "Sure would like to play that on Red." He sobered as he remembered. "Sorry, Red—"

"Yeah," interrupted the pimply one impatiently. "Red met with an accident. Look, I'm givin' yuh a chance t' get even with Hogarth. Only don't guess *ev'ry* time. Here he comes."

HOGARTH approached the table and looked at the currency with curious interest. "It's a new game," said the pimply one. "I can't beat him at it."

Hogarth pushed the pimply one out of his chair unceremoniously. "Never was a game *I* couldn't beat," he growled. "Show me what it is."

Tip obligingly went through the preliminary details except that he disclosed nothing about the detecting the odd or even identity of the serial number.

They started playing at one dollar a guess, then at Hogarth's angry insistence raised the ante to five and then ten. Tip continued to keep out front.

Finally, after Hogarth had lost several guesses in a row as Tip called the odd or even, Hogarth exploded. "You can't win again, It's against th' law of averages. He shoved out a bundle of money. "There's five hundred there. Bet that if you dare."

Tip studied the corner of the envelop and the exposed bill. It was an "E" That meant that the serial number would be odd.

"Okay," agreed Tip. He shoved five hundred dollars toward the center of the table. Onlookers crowded around.

Hogarth started to extract the bill. "Make y'r guess," he growled. "Odd or even?"

"Even," said Tip calmly.

Hogarth had the bill almost out of the envelope before he realized that Tip had said "Even." Hogarth's lean features turned red and then white, but he had extracted the bill suffici-

(Continued On Page 79)

Mayor by Murder

by
BILL WALLACE

Jem Cawley was content that people fear him — but when they were ready to honor him, too . . .

JEM CAWLEY'S face was as flat and blank as the side of a cliff. He leaned back against the bar and looked down at the bearded little deputy, noting the sweat of fear on his forehead. "Say that again," Cawley demanded, his voice like the sound of a dull saw.

The deputy's eyes had a nervous twitch. "That's right, Jem; Sheriff Bane dares you to come back to town."

Cawley drained the whiskey tumbler, which looked like a thimble in his hand, and his guffaw shook every glass in the bar. Sheriff Bane was such a short man he could have walked under Jem's horse without bending over. He had sad, brown eyes and a mustache that drooped on the ends. And he was daring Jem Cawley to come back to town!

"Well, let's get goin'," Cawley said, pushing the little man out of his way.

There was a hound dog sleeping under the swinging doors; Jem gave him a kick that sent him yelping over the mudwalk into the dust of the street. Cawley watched him limp around the corner, his tail dragging the ground. "And that *dog's* even bigger than Sheriff Bane," Jem said, poking a forefinger like a broomstick into the deputy's ribs.

They took the desert trail that led through ten miles of sage and cactus to Silver Rock. The rising sun was hot on their backs, and Jem took frequent drags from the bottle he carried in the saddlebag. The joke got funnier as they rode along. It was the kind of joke Cawley could understand. The simple joke of the strong crushing the weak.

Still, Sheriff Bane was different from the others; at least he didn't sidle around like a deer about to bolt for cover. He always looked Jem squarely in the eyes, and that made Cawley vaguely uncomfortable.

They were about half way to Silver Rock when Jem pulled in his horse so the deputy could catch up with him. "I hear someone shot Dawson last night," Cawley said.

The deputy nodded.

"Did the killer get the pay load?"

"Nope. It's safe in the bank," the deputy said.

Jem hadn't meant to kill the bank messenger, Dawson, but when the man met him at the appointed spot with the pay load, Jem hadn't seen any sense in splitting it. A rabbit

punch would have done it, but Dawson got suspicious and went for his gun; Jem's slug tore his shirt just above the heart.

Before Jem could bury the heavy bags in the creek bottom he heard the thunder of horses. He'd had to light out for Huntsville, leaving Dawson there, dead, with all that money.

Was that why Sheriff, Bane wanted to see him: Cawley laughed and took a long drag from the bottle. There wasn't any evidence—and if there was, who had the guts to arrest him? Lots of sheriffs had overlooked evidence before—where Jem was concerned.

They were getting close now. Up ahead Jem could see the green of the cottonwoods that shaded Silver Rock. As they neared the creek in front of the town he saw a banner stretched across the trail. There was writing on it. He squinted to make out the letters.

JEM CAWLEY FOR MAYOR

JEM CAWLEY stared at the banner for a long time. Those four words did funny things to him.

Then he looked up, watched two horses gallop towards him and cross the dry creek bed. It was Sheriff Bane, so small that there was room in the saddle for three more just like him; the other was a lanky, redheaded deputy called Russ.

Jem kept his gun hand at his side. "I hear you were darin' me to come back."

The sheriff's brown eyes met him squarely. "That's right, Jem. Daring you was the only way to get you here: if I asked you, nice-like, you wouldn't have come."

"Pretty smart, ain't you." Cawley's laugh was a rasping challenge. "Get it off your chest. I'm a busy man."

"Too busy to be mayor of Silver Rock?" the little sheriff asked.

Jem thought a moment over that one. Mayor! Why not? All he had ever demanded from people was fear; he'd never expected honor, too. The idea made him feel good. He'd run this town just the way he wanted, build the biggest house in the county.

Cawley looked down at Sheriff Bane, his flat face blank, his eyes beady. "If you're kiddin' me, I'll wring that sparrow's neck of yours."

Sheriff Bane didn't flinch. "Ride into town, if you don't believe me," he said, quietly.

Jem trotted his horse down the main street beside the sheriff's pinto. Up ahead, in front of the jail, he saw a crowd of people. There were more banners strung across the street with the same words on them: JEM CAWLEY FOR MAYOR.

What would it be like to have people respect you, as well as fear you? he wondered. To be on the inside of every business in town?

"If Dawson had gotten away with that pay load," Sheriff Bane was saying, "the bank—the whole town—would have folded. We knew it was you who saved Silver Rock; your big footprints were all over the place. The people are mighty grateful, Jem."

"Huh?" he said, his face almost betraying surprise. So they thought he'd killed Dawson to save the bank's money. They thought he was a hero! His guffaw shook the dry air.

"Some joke my bein' mayor, eh, Bane?"

The sheriff's brown eyes were dead serious. "Yeah. 'Course Silver Rock ain't ever had a mayor before, so you'll be the first one; well, here we are."

They tied their horses in front of the jail and walked up the steps to the porch. The heavy iron railing of the platform was draped with bunting to make it look like a ceremonial stand. A big book and a gavel rested on top of the iron railing.

Down below, a four-piece band started playing *"There'll Be a Hot Time."* Sheriff Bane pounded the gavel and a quiet settled over the crowd. The eyes of all those people fixed on him gave Jem a strange sense of power.

"We'll now read the oath of office," Sheriff Bane said. "Put your right hand on the Book, Jem."

Jem covered the book with his hand

and leered into the field of faces before him.

There was a metallic click. Cavley felt a band of cold steel around his wrist. He looked down; he was manacled to the railing! Jem pulled with all the strength of his powerful arm, but railing didn't give; it was bedded deep in concrete.

"You're under arrest for the murder of Bob Dawson," Sheriff Bane said. He took the leather volume from the railing and handed it to Deputy Russ. "Take this law book back to the office."

Jem's roar was the sound of a trapped bear. "Dawson was stealin' that money."

"Dawson was working with us; his signed statement's in my office." A shade of a smile formed on the sheriff's mouth. "You'll get a fair trial, Mayor."

THE END

SHOOT THE SUCKER

(Continued From Page 70)

ently enough so that all could see that the number was even.

"I got good eyesight," said Tip with no evidence of liquor thickening his tongue. "I could see that the '*F*' had been changed to an '*E*'. My pal Red Dalton in Cayunne City didn't find that out till after he had been duped."

Two men sprang back from the table at the same instant. Only one gun barked. Hogarth's gun fell from his lifeless fingers as he sprawled across the table.

Tip holstered his smoking Colt. He said calmly to the dazed onlookers, "I gave him more chance than he gave Red. Red found out he'd been tricked and went lookin' for this thief—and got shot in the back. You boys better pick up that rat with the pimply face —while I pick up this money. Red's got folks what c'n use it."

Ride with Bill Borden into Calder Town, known as

The Devil's Doorstep

This new, booklength novel by

PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

appears in the big April issue of

Complete Cowboy

NOVEL MAGAZINE

Now On Sale At All Stands

Peg-Leg was new to some of the expressions they used here in the West —but banditry and drygulching were old things to him, and he knew what to do about them.

Unusual, Action-Packed Novelet

the Coming of Peg-Leg

by VAL GENDRON

THE STAGE slowly topped the last rise before Rainstorm, and the driver uncoiled his whip to enter town at a fast gallop. The spent, tired horses raised their heads knowing water and full feed bins were just ahead. The driver and his sole dust-covered passenger sat up straighter.

After the bleak, dusty desert they had crossed the green valley lay invitingly before them, shimmering and indistinct in the heat waves. Clustered in the heart of the meadows and

Peg-Leg started to whoop it up . . . .

forest, the little town raised its roofs defiantly in the solitude.

The sailor sitting beside the driver pointed ahead. "Land ahoy?" he asked a voice that could easily have been heard from the poop deck to the top of the mizzen mast.

The driver nodded, glanced furtively at the seafaring man; such men were rare in the deserts of the southwest and Andrew Michels was on the lookout for this one.

The sailor was a tall, lean man well to the leeward of middle age. His features were sharp, his blue eyes cold and far-seeing. He wore the traditional knitted cap of the sailor and under the caking of dust his clothes were navy. His brown arms were fantastically tatooed with a tasteful assortment of anchors, mermaids and ships bowling along under full sail. A dust-caked, but merrily-chattering monkey sat atop his shoulder.

His right leg had been amputated at the knee, and his peg leg stuck out straight over the buckboard of the driver's seat. It gave him his name, Peg Leg. In his right ear he wore an ear-ring, proclaiming he was a seven-sea's man and that the equator was well known to him.

He looked hard and tough and self-reliant; but he didn't look the man to be carrying a fortune in pearls in his pocket.

The driver grinned crookedly. "That's Rainstorm ahead. You stopping there?"

"Aye." Peg Leg whittled some tobacco from a slug and stuffed it into a charred, blackened pipe. He cupped his hands, and, despite the steep downgrade lit it quickly.

"You seem a long way from home?" The driver kept pumping according to Michels instructions.

"From Surinam, if you know it; I've come half around the world." His voice woke the echoes in the canyon.

The driver cracked his whip, and the monkey on Peg Leg' shoulder excitedly bit his ear. He jerked his head sideways, laughing. A bullet whistled past and he heard the bark of a rifle.

"Must be important business," the driver observed ignoring the shot. He cracked the whip over the horses' heads, and they broke into a gallop, the stage rocking and swaying like a ship.

IF PEG LEG hadn't felt the swish of the bullet he might have imagined the sharp report was nothing but the echo of the cracking of the driver's whip. Obviously there was heavy weather ahead. He fondled the monkey gratefully, "Thanks, Skipper," he whispered.

He sat his seat easily, puffing slowly at the pipe clenched between his teeth. He'd batten down his hatches and keep a weather-eye open for squalls ahead; two could play at cat and mouse, so he answered the driver's question casually.

"Aye. I've a mate in Rainstorm."

Still the driver wasn't satisfied. His instructions had been clear, but the sailor wasn't talkative. "I know everybody in town; I don't know a sailor."

The seaman laughed good-naturedly, and the monkey chattered faster, as if he, too, understood the joke. "He's no sea-faring man," he roared.

"Thought you said he was a mate of yours," the driver answered gruffly as they pounded into town.

"A cousin," Peg Leg exclaimed briefly.

The dust of the streets rose in a cloud about them, and over the heads of his horses the driver cracked and snapped his whip like the bark of many guns.

At the stage depot a band of idlers hung around, their thunbs hooked in the belts that supported their guns, their faces alive with eagerness and curiosity to see who was on the stage. Rainstorm was a lonely, tough frontier town and the stage arriving once a week was an event.

The sailor ignored the laughter that greeted his dusty appearance. He threw his battered sea chest down. "Avast, you lubbers!" he boomed, and swung down from the driver's seat as easily as if he had worn no peg leg.

A tall buckeroo shouldered his way through the crowd. "Hiya, Peg Leg!"

The crowd drew back respectfully. Any friend of Jimmy Burley's was treated with respect; Jimmy had a reputation with the six-shooters

strapped to his thighs.

"Lay to it!" Peg Leg exclaimed as he grasped Jimmy's hand. "Belay, if it isn't the laddie, himself."

Jimmy pumped his hand. "Did you bring it?"

"Aye," Peg Leg patted the monkey to quiet it. It was jumping around in its excitement and screaming at the top of its lungs. "I got the baubel, laddie, but it seems an expensive present to be giving for a bit of duff."

Jimmy laughed loud and merrily; they were only a few years apart, but they looked like man and boy together. Peg Leg had gone to sea at seven, and at seventeen had his own ship; it ages a man.

"Wait till you lay eyes on her," Jimmy went on; "you'll change your mind. But come on, let's wet our whistles."

"It'll take more than a dram," Peg Leg observed soberly. "I got an inch of alkali dust lining my throat that'll take all the rum in town to wash out. I didn't know there was this much dust in the world. But tell me about the girl; is she shipshape and seaworthy?"

"As pretty a creature as you could set your eyes on," Jimmy replied as Peg Leg hoisted his sea chest abroad his shoulder and stomped along beside him.

* * *

JIMMY led the way to *The Golden Chance* and pushed the door open. "After we have a drink, we'll ride out to my diggings and tonight you'll meet her."

Peg Leg came to a full stop at the door, dropped his battered sea chest to the plank sidewalk. "You mean," he demanded indignantly, "that I have to get astride one of those creatures?" He pointed through the open door to the horses who stood with hanging heads along the rail, wearily whisking flies from their lean sides.

"Sure," Jimmy grinned.

"Man and boy, you'll never do that to me! I've sailed my way around the world a dozen times on anything from a sloop to a full-rigged clipper, but shiver my timbers and blast me for a lubber if I ever put my peg leg across one of them things!"

He paused midway in his harange, but it wasn't for breath. He was staring across the street at a girl who walked quietly past with eyes averted, her full skirts swelling gently around her feet as she walked and her delicate head held high and proud as a ship's figurehead.

"Is that the lass?" he asked, his voice no longer a roaring bellow.

Jimmy shook his head. "No. That's Millissa Roberts; her father's the local haberdasher."

"She's a handsome craft," Peg Leg said thoughtfully. "She looks like she'd lie a point nearer the wind than any man would have the right to expect, and that's the short and sweet of it."

Jimmy laughed. "She'd got high ideas, that girl; she wouldn't look twice at a common buckeroo and I'll bet that holds for seafaring men, too."

Peg Leg shrugged and picked up his sea chest. "She can afford to carry herself proud, I ain't seen a prettier rig since I saw the *Sea Witch* once under full sail off Madagascar."

He stomped into the darkess of the bar, deposited his sea chest beside him and settled his weight on his peg leg. "Rum," he said, "and leave the bottle."

"Out here we drink whiskey," Jimmy smiled assurance at the bewildered bartender who set the bottle down and edged off, but not so far as to be out of hearing.

Peg Leg tilted the bottle, tossed off a drink and repeated the performance, until Jimmy called a halt. "What you trying to do, float that leg of yours?"

"Naw, laddie. I'm washing down the dust. So far I've just got it wet enough to have a load of mud in my innards."

The bartender was regarding his new customer with respect. Any man who could drink like that and remain solidly on his two feet was a man after his own heart.

"Bring another bottle," Peg Leg bellowed. Only then did he turn to Jimmy. "All right out with it. You must be in a clove hitch to send for

me. I shipped back as soon as I got the word. What's on your mind?"

JIMMY looked sheepish. "Like I said in my letter, I want to give the pearls to a girl."

"Sure," Peg Leg said patiently. "But avast, lad, you're no lubber; you don't give a fortune in pearls to a girl, just because she's got a sweet voice. Besides why was somebody laying for me outside of town?"

"What do you mean?" Jimmy's eyes narrowed.

"As we were coming over the hill with all sails bent, some lubber takes a pot shot at me from behind a rock. Now," Peg Leg wagged his head, "nobody does that for nothing; somebody wants to keep me out bad."

"So," Jimmy hesitated, "Michels tried to drygulch you!"

Peg Leg regarded him curiously. "What kind of lingo is that?"

"Means to shoot you from ambush." Jimmy picked up the bottle and their two glasses. "Come on over to a table; not so many ears."

"Only place I know where people can't overhear you is the end of a yard arm," Peg Leg observed dryly; "and I don't see no yard arm around here."

Jimmy sat down. "Wasn't only because I wanted the pearls that I sent for you."

"Didn't think it was." Peg Leg sat down, easing his right leg under the table.

"This is a wild town. Most of the West is like this, especially in these mining towns. I've got a rich claim and naturally Michels doesn't like that."

"Who's Michels?"

"Local big-shot. Some say our local bad man, but they don't say it to his face. He owns all the saloons in town, the honky-tonks, has the Sheriff in the palm of his hand and owns the richest stake around; so he's legitimate and no one can touch him. Even the so-called reform element can't find anything to hang on him."

Peg Leg downed another drink. "What has he against you?"

"I own the second richest diggings in town," Jimmy replied.

"Isn't the land big enough to hold the two of you?"

"No. He wants my stake and he'll get it, too, before long. I'm mortgaged to the hilt, and every time I try to ship ore out, the stage gets robbed. Wells Fargo won't insure me anymore."

"And you think he's stealing the wind from your sails?"

"I can't prove it," Jimmy shrugged his shoulders and poured himself a drink. "Besides, I changed my mind. I'm not going to fight; all I want is Lucy."

"If you had the pluck of a biscuit weevil you'd fight," Peg Leg declared and his voice boomed suddenly in the stillness of *The Golden Chance*.

"That's not all," Jimmy said quietly. "He had another reason for not liking me. Lucy, the girl I want to marry, is his star singer at the *San Francisco Club*. Michels doesn't like competition. When I give her the pearls," he smiled slyly, "I think Mr. Michels can look for another star singer."

Peg Leg twirled the whiskey glass. "What have you been doing?"

"Nothing," Jimmy said. "Nothing but waiting. I've been waiting for you to get here, and waiting to get out."

"Avast and belay," Peg Leg roared. "You can't tack and put about, and tack and put about in a situation like this. In a case like this you have to batten down your hatches and trim your sails to the wind."

"You don't know Michels," Jimmy said despondantly.

"Avast, laddie, what's happened to you? You sail like a water-logged craft without rudder or compass. What you need is to set a trap for this land pirate. You'll catch him quick enough; many's the double-smart lad I've seen drying in the hot sun from a giblet that tried those tricks at sea. What's this lubber like?"

"You asking for me?" a smooth, distinguished voice cut in. Andrew Michels didn't have the look of a bad man or a pirate; he was fat, and

jolly with a cheerful smile spread across his face, and a big black cigar clutched in his pudgy hand. The hand also displayed a diamond of respectable proportions.

"We been boarded?" Peg Leg asked Jimmy.

MICHELS came forward confidently. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your pal? We don't see many like him around here."

"This is a private party," Jimmy said calmly.

Michels continued to smile. "The boy bears me a grudge." He winked significantly at Peg Leg. "Women have a way of setting the best of friends at each other's throats."

"Stand off," Peg Leg boomed. "I stand by the lad. If he don't like the cut of your jib, neither do I."

"Isn't that a bit rash?" Michels questioned.

Peg Leg settled back in his chair. "Mr," he said shortly. "I didn't fire the first gun in this affair. Some lubber pot-shotted at me before I was even in port; I figure that wouldn't have been one of Jimmy's friends."

Michel waved a fat hand. "I regret the impetuousness of your welcoming committee. But I like the look of you, and I think you should know the facts. Jimmy here can't get his ore out of town, and he's unreasonably decided I'm behind it. Now I'm a respectable, law-abiding business man. The Sheriff is one of my best friends—"

"So I hear," Peg Leg cut in. The Skipper on his shoulder screamed at the fat man. "Now, you listen to me; the only way you'd look good to me is hanging from the end of a yard arm, and I'm prepared to import the yard arm. Is that clear?'

Andrew Michels spread his hands across the large expanse of his vest. "Then I must warn you, any violation of the law is quickly punished here; we have our own Boothill."

Peg Leg watched him soberly as he walked away. "I assume he was discussing plank walking by another name," he said casually. "Come on, laddie, this is no place to cast anchor."

Once again he hoisted his sea chest to his shoulder, and stomped slowly out. Outside the door he looked carefully up and down the dusty, sun-baked street.

"Well," Jimmy said, "I guess we better ride out to my diggings."

"There a hotel in town?" Peg Leg asked. "I told you I'd not go aboard one of them four-legged dingys and I meant it."

"Michels owns the only hotel in town."

"So much the better," Peg Leg laughed. "Easier to keep a weather-eye on him."

* * *

PEG-LEG registered at the desk, ordered a bottle of whiskey sent to his room and hitched himself up the broad stairs. He lifted the monkey to the chandelier and watched him swinging there. "That'll keep him happy."

He filled his pipe. "Now tell me, laddie. Suppose you give the pearls to the lass, and you get her. How's that going to get your ore out of town? Seems to me you're rigging your ship before you've launched your hull."

Jimmy sat down on the edge of the bed. He was despondent and discouraged; he looked to Peg Leg like a sea-sick cabin boy. "I don't know." Jimmy threw his stetson across the room and the Skipper leaped after it.

Peg Leg retrieved the hat, cuffed the chattering beast. "How come you lost your course? Can't steer a ship without a course to lay to."

"Wait until you see Lucy," Jimmy changed the subject. "She's as pretty as a picture and when she sings, it sort of gets in your blood—under your skin, if you know what I mean."

Peg Leg lit his pipe. "You're still young, Jimmy, and you ain't the first man to lose his ship over a woman."

"She's got Michels, too; she's got him following her around like a dog on a leash."

"Maybe. Maybe it's the other way around. Michels pays her; maybe he pays her to act that way, too."

"Never!"

Peg Leg cocked a doubtful eye at Jimmy, then thoughtfully smoked his pipe. At last he said, "How long you got before you lose your ship?"

"My ship?"

"Your mine."

"A month." Jimmy got up from the bed and began to pace the room restlessly.

"Sit down!" Peg Leg snapped. "If you wasn't my cousin, and I hadn't promised your Ma to look after you, I'd hoist my anchor and get out. You won't even try to get back on your course."

Jimmy sat down. "I'm sorry Peg Leg; I didn't mean to drag you into this. If you'll just give me the pearls, I'll get you out and you can go back to sea."

Peg Leg laughed. "No land lubber is going to take a shot at me and get away with it."

"If there wasn't a woman involved, I'd fight. But as it is, I just want to get Lucy and go away with her."

"Sorry, Jimmy lad, I didn't ask to sign on this ship. I was shanghied in a manner of speaking. But I never jumped a ship yet, and this isn't going to be the first time. Now buck up; I want to know how you ship that ore out."

"We cast it in bars and send it on the stage under the protection of Wells Fargo. But I've been robbed so often Wells Fargo won't insure me anymore." He laughed ruefully. "You wouldn't know what that means. But out here it's big news; Wells Fargo has never before refused to insure shipments of ore. These fellows come down masked, on horseback, and ride off into the desert with the bars in their saddlebags."

"I knew a man in China," Peg Leg reminisced, "who was troubled by a similar problem. Only over there they call their land pirates, bandits."

"Did he have a girl, too?" Jimmy asked.

"No. He didn't have anything else to distract him; that's one reason, I suppose, why he solved his problem."

Jimmy sat up. "He did, did he!"

"Aye. He did." Peg Leg smoked silently.

"I suppose he was rich and hired an armed guard," Jimmy suggested.

"No. He was down to his last tub of hardtack. He took his ore out alone and unarmed."

"Impossible!" Jimmy declared.

"He did it," Peg Leg repeated quietly.

"How?"

"He used his head; suppose you go and do the same."

JIMMY rubbed his jaw. He was a big, strapping fellow, handy with his guns, not the sort to be counted out of the game before the last chip was down. Maybe Lucy had spun him like a top, but that didn't mean he'd go on spinning all his life.

"After you've figured it out, you can have the pearls." Peg Leg announced. "You can give 'em to your bit of duff, and live happily ever after."

He unbuttoned the breast pocket of his shirt, hooked the string of pearls out with a clumsy forefinger. He held them to the light. They were big and black and perfectly matched and they gleamed darkly in the sunshine.

"A King's Ransom," Peg Leg observed. "Your mother was a remarkable woman. She could sit in her little parlor in Salem town and figure out just exactly what the King of Siam or Madagascar or the Emperor of China would be wanting. She was a shrewd woman, and a good woman, and she gave me my first ship; I never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd be glad she was dead."

Jimmy jerked as if he'd been slapped across the face, and he turned a sickly green under his tan. "Okay. You win," he snapped. "So I wasted every cent she ever made, so I'm up to my neck in trouble; I'll do this thing my own way without your help."

He strode through the door and slammed it behind him.

Peg Leg stomped after him, threw open the door and shouted grimly, "I'm right behind you!"

But Jimmy didn't stop. He went

right on down the stairs, his hat jammed on his head and his broad shoulders hunched.

* * *

THE NEXT morning Peg Leg took up his station on the broad veranda of the hotel. There wasn't any wood to whittle in that desert town, so he just smoked his pipe and watched the people as they went by.

Millisa Roberts went by early, her head high and her skirts billowing. Her eyes when they reached momentarily on him were as clean and cool as the air of a Labrador iceberg.

Smoke rose in short, quick puffs from Peg Leg's pipe. There was a girl worth fighting for. In all his travels he'd never seen anything that was so close to the visions a man summons up in the still, dark watches of the night when the stars are shimmering above a phosphorescent sea.

Aye, for that he was willing to wait..

Andrew Michels strolled past, pompous and assured. He smiled and waved at Peg Leg.

Peg Leg regarded him stonily. Did the man expect him to come running like a dog to a whistle? The impertinence of him! There was no question about it, he'd have to lay to and keep a bright look out—no, it was worse than that. His craft was rolling scuppers under in the swell and the booms were tearing at the blocks, he'd have to cling tight to the backstay.

Drat Jimmy—now was the time for the boy to stand by and not leave him becalmed to figure out the whole course for himself.

A kangle of harness trappings made Peg Leg look up and he saw a man rising into town on a high stepping nag with all flags flying. It was quite an outfit. The sun shone on the silver fittings of the saddle and leather holsters and reflected blindingly. It was a young man with a hard, cold face, and a look of pride and defiance about him like he dared every person he met to stand up toe to toe with him and battle it out.

Peg Leg sat up. *Ah ha, my pretty dandy,* he thought, *there's a right smart chance that you're the lubber that took a pot-shot at me last night.*

The rider reined in beside Michels, his horse dancing and prancing, throwing his head high and specking the immaculate Michels with foam. Andrew Michels took out a fresh linen hankerchief and quietly wiped the foam from his fine coat.

"Hello Smith," he said softly.

Peg Leg nodded to himself and the smoke came in pleased and satisfied puffs from his pipe. A man like Michels wouldn't tolerate such goings on unless there was a damn good reason. Besides Smith was too obviously an alias.

"Hi, Andy!" The young man's familiarity confirmed Peg Leg in his opinion.

As Smith swung down from his saddle Peg Leg saw the rifle strapped to its pommel; he got up and stomped down the steps. "Mr. Michels," he called out.

Michels turned sharply. "Yes?"

"Perhaps I was a bit hasty last night, but my mate had the wind up," Peg Leg explained.

Michels held out a soft, fat hand. "Better late than never," he laughed silkily.

Peg Leg covered the hand with his hard, brown one and grinned blandly. "Like to meet your mate. How about a drink for all hands? Just to show there's no hard feelings."

"Sure thing," Smith grunted.

Peg Leg laid a cautious hand on the restless horse. "Mighty fine craft you're signed with," he observed.

Michels laughed. "Out here, we say you can judge a man by the horse he rides. According to that, it makes Smith the best man in this country."

Peg Leg smiled. When a man like Michels goes out of his way being nice to a chap of Smith's stripe there's always a good reason.

"I'm no judge of horse flesh," he replied, "But I've yet to see a prettier beast."

Smith strutted a little, rubbed the horse's nose possessively. "Best in the whole yucca country," he declared. "But what are we standing here gassing all day for? I thought you said something about a drink. Welching already?"

"I don't welch on nothing," Peg Leg said shortly. He led the way to *The Golden Chance.*

The bartender grinned a welcome, set a new bottle on the bar. "Three glasses," Peg Leg said.

The bartender winked at Michels and Smith, then he laughed softly. "You're going to have to look to your drinking Smith. You're going to lose your championship if this sailor stays in town. I'll bet you a bottle he can outdrink you."

"Out-drink, out-play and out-shoot you in fair weather or foul," Peg Leg challanged quietly.

Smith turned a dull red. "You're a liar," he said flatly.

Peg Leg laughed. "Now I'm sure of it; you lose your anchor too fast to be much use in a squall." He raised his glass, "A steady wind," he toasted.

Michels downed his drink, but Smith left his untouched on the bar. "Something wrong, laddie?" Peg Leg asked.

"He's trying to lock horns with you," the bartender explained. "He don't like that crack you made about out-drinking and out-shooting him; he's a mighty fancy gun-fanner."

Peg Leg refilled his glass. "In short, you're telling me he's just fired a shot acros my bow."

Michels laughed. "You two will never get together; you don't talk the same language at all."

Smith picked up his untasted glass and dashed the contents in Peg Leg's face. "Maybe he'll understand that!" he snarled.

Michels jerked Smith around. "None of that!" he said curtly, "that's no way to act when a man buys you a drink!"

Peg Leg wiped the streaming liquor from his face. "A seafaring man's used to a little wetting," he said quietly. "Trouble with the youngster is he slips his anchor at the first sign of dirty weather. You'd be better advised to wait and see which way the wind is going to set."

"Are you going to fight!" Smith cried, "or are you a yellow-bellied yearling fuller of gas than of sand?"

"I'll fight you man and boy in any way manner or form, providing you're the land pirate I'm looking for," Peg Leg announced. "All I want to know out of you, is are you the lubber that took a pot shot at me last night or not?"

"What's that got to do with it?" Smith yelled.

Michels grabbed him hard. "Come on, you hot-head!" he shouted, "Get out of here!"

Smith shook him off as a dog shakes off a fly. "Get along, doggie, this is a man's work."

Michels sprang back. "Don't be a fool, Smith!"

"Are you giving me orders?" Smith asked in a deadly cold voice.

Michels was instantly contrite. "No, no. Of course not. I was just trying to point out that this fellow is a friend of Jim Burley's; he's trying to make trouble."

"He's succeeded," Smith answered.

"Let him alone," Michels pleaded. "We don't want a killing."

"You run along," Smith laughed unpleasantly. "My saddle's not slipping; I can handle a one-legged sailor without help or advice from you."

Michels appealed in turn to Peg Leg. "You're not going to pay any attention to the bragging of a hot-headed youngster are you?"

Peg Leg returned his glance steadily. "That depends on the answer I get to the question I asked. Besides, he's not such a youngster; I believe he was launched about the same time as I was. Not more'n a year or two difference between us."

Michels spread his soft, pudgy hands across his vest in a gesture of negation. "Well, I suppose boys will be boys and if you're determined to fight there's nothing I can do to stop it. I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"Just like Pilate," Peg Leg said. He had the impression that Michels was really delighted at the turn of events, that he asked nothing better than to have Peg Leg eliminated in a bar room brawl.

THEY BOTH watched silently as Andrew Michels made his way to the door and stepped from the deep shadows of the bar into the bright sunshine outside. Then Smith turned, "Well, now will you fight?"

Peg Leg shrugged. "I'm still waiting for an answer to my question; were you the blasted lubber who took a pot shot at me the night I came into town?"

For answer, Smith's hand snaked back to his hip and the heavy .44 gleamed ominously in his hand.

"Start moving, sailor. Start getting out of town!"

"You're mighty sharp with that gun," Peg Leg observed.

"Yeah," the bartender put in. "Smith's never caught with his saddle slipping. He's got the fastest draw 'round here." Systematically he began removing bottles and glasses from behind the bar.

Peg Leg grinned a lop sided grin. "Since you caught me all unmanned, you might let me finish my drink."

"Okay," Smith agreed. "Drink up and get going, far and fast."

Peg Leg turned to the bar, tossed off his drink, closed his big fist around the neck of the bottle. "I'm a dry man; how about more?"

"Make it fast!"

Peg Leg never poured that drink. He had the bottle firm by the neck and he threw it as he had thrown many a belaying pin 'cross decks with deadly accuracy to quell mutiny on the high seas.

Before Smith had quite grasped the significance of the gesture, his .44 had been knocked out of his hand and clattered to the floor. At the same instant, Peg Leg let go the bottle he had, braced himself against the bar and using it as support flung his body after the fallen weapon.

As Smith reached for the gun on his other hip, Peg Leg grabbed the fallen .44 and leveled it at him. "Okay," he said pleasantly, "things seem to have evened off."

"By Gar!" the bartender exclaimed. "Got the drop on you, Smith!"

The young man's face turned a dusky red and the white, slowly as he gazed into Peg Leg's eyes his hand wavered and he slowly raised his hands above his shoulders. "You wouldn't kill an unarmed man, would you?" he asked doubtfully.

"Toss your gun over to me," Peg Leg directed.

Smith pulled his gun from its holster, tossed it across the room.

Peg Leg looked regretfully at the smashed bottle and the good whiskey seeping slowly into the dry wood of the floor. "Pity to waste all that grog," he sighed. "How much do I owe you?"

"Three bucks," the bartender said. "But forget it; that was on the house. I'd give a dozen bottles to see that trick done again."

"I'll remember that the next time I'm broke," Peg Leg said as he fished three dollars from his pocket, threw them on the bar. "Come on, Smith," he said curtly. "Start walking."

Smith edged forward to the door, all the defiance gone from his manner. To Peg Leg he seemed no better than a cringing dog.

"There's your ship, clear port," Peg Leg pointed with the .44 at Smith's horse. "And if I ever see that silly face of yours around here, we'll have a yard arm party, seafaring style. I think," he added significantly, "you understand my meaning without translation."

SMITH mounted, jerked hard on the reins, and his horse reared and plunged before he turned and galloped out of sight in a cloud of dust.

"That was a risky thing to do," the bartender said. "All you've done is made him mad. Now he'll really try to kill you. You should have plugged him while you had the chance."

"I'll keep a weather eye open for him," Peg Leg promised as he stomped down the street. What he wanted was to see Jimmy, and he calculated he'd have about a week to wait until the young man's pride permitted him to return. But Peg Leg had the pearls and a way to get the ore out

without risk and he knew Jimmy'd be back.

* * *

While he waited Peg Leg sat on the front porch and watched the townsmen pass. He watched Andrew Michels, saw the men who passed the time of day with him. A queer assortment they were—the best and the worst elements in town. Andrew Michels knew everybody; it was Peg Leg's private opinion that you couldn't touch pitch and not be mucked.

He spotted Lucy, too. And that without much trouble; he knew the type and didn't think much of it; he'd seen them to honky tonk towns from Port Said to Singapore, from Liverpool to New Orleans. When a sailor came into port dry and dough-heavy and starving for a bit of female companionship they were waiting for him. Sure, they were pals while a man had his fling, but when he'd been sucked dry and owned but the shirt on his back, they were off after fresh game. Peg Leg knew the type.

Having settled his score with Smith, Peg Leg had nothing to do but haul to the wind and keep to the weather side for the present. He just watched and waited and noted that Michels tipped his big hat to him, and that Smith wasn't to be seen on the fancy horse of his.

It was dusk when Jimmy came back, hat in hand. "I guess I was acting the fool," he admitted. "Also your friend in China was smarter than I am."

Peg Leg hoisted himself out of his chair, the pet monkey set up a jibbering welcome and danced the hornpipe on his shoulder.

"You and me'll take a walk," Peg Leg agreed. Down the middle of the street he stomped, his wooden leg making deep holes in the soft dust. As he talked, Jimmy began to laugh; it was a simple, workable solution. All he needed was a heavy cart with wide wheels to haul the stuff, and then to cast his ore in heavy balls weighing about a quarter of a ton apiece. Sure it could be done.

The success of the robbers depended on their being able to disappear with the stuff into the hills on the rocky trails where a horse left no trail. No one could drive off a wagon like that without leaving a trail as broad and easy to follow as a skunk's.

Jimmy laughed loudly. "Smart friends you have, Peg Leg."

"Travel," Peg Leg grinned back, "broadens a man."

"About the pearls," Jimmy reminded him. 'I'd like to borrow them tonight to show them to Lucy."

"Aye," Peg Leg agreed. "Not a bad idea. Mind if I sort of follow you to windward?"

"Come along, I want you to meet her."

"I've seen her cruising up and down," Peg Leg interrupted; "I'll come as a sort of supercargo." He fished the pearls from his pocket, handed them to Jimmy.

TOGETHER they shouldered their way through the crowd at the *San Francisco Club*. Jimmy went directly to a table close to the small stage; the waiter knew him. "Lucy'll be on in a couple of minutes," he smiled knowlingly.

Peg Leg sat down, looked around. The *San Francisco Club* had the look of all such places no matter where they might be on the earth's surface. The air was heavy with smoke; under the noise and confusion of voices he could hear the clink of glasses, the whirl of the roulette wheels, the slap of cards. A clip joint was a clip joint, and it was well to pipe all hands on deck and stand by.

"Wait till you hear her sing," Jimmy confided. "It isn't until you hear her sing, that she really gets you."

The monkey on Peg Leg's shoulder coiled his tail tightly around his master's neck and clung to him terrified at the sudden burst of applause that came when the curtain was pulled back and Lucy revealed.

Peg Leg gazed at her soberly. She looked better in the lamplight; the gold of her hair, seemed like spun

gold, distance made her features more delicate and the harsh lights blended the make-up, softened it until she looked like a dresden doll.

Her voice was clear and bell-like, with an innocence of tone that belied the shrewdness of her eyes. "Just close your eyes, and listen to her," Jimmy suggested following his own advice.

Even the Skipper on Peg Leg's shoulder joined in the applause, beating his tiny paws together in imitation of the others.

"Monkey see, monkey do," Peg Leg observed.

Lucy joined them. "I've seen you about town," she said to Peg Leg. "I'm happy to meet you." Her voice was sweet on the ear. She reached over and touched the monkey's paw. "Hello, there, little fellow."

The Skipper sent up a violent stream of screams that sounded amazingly like profanity.

"He don't take to women," Peg Leg explained.

Lucy sat down, "Takes after you, I suppose."

Peg Leg grinned. "No, I'm more susceptible." He poured a drink for himself, another for Lucy. "Here's to ourselves, and hold your luff, plenty of prizes and plenty of duff."

"I like that," she smiled, raised her glass.

"Old as the sea," he commented. "Seafaring folks been using it since the days of the Spanish Main."

She laid a white hand on his brown, tatooed arm. "Any friend of Jimmy's is a friend of mine."

Peg Leg downed another drink. "Jimmy's got something to show you; show her the baubel, mate."

Jimmy drew out the string of pearls, held them to catch the light. Peg Leg downed two drinks before anyone said anything.

Slowly Lucy let out her breath. "I never saw anything like them."

"Worth a King's Ransom," Peg Leg said thickly as he poured another drink.

Respectfully, Lucy fingered the pearls; Peg Leg noted that her eyes grew wide. "That ain't all, he whispered drunkenly. "Jimmy's going to have another try at getting out the ore. Talking it out ourselves Wednesday night."

Jimmy tried to kick him under the table. "Thought you said the only place to talk was on the end of a yard arm."

"I whispered it," Peg Leg protested. "Lucy's your girl, and no one'll know we're going by way of Spanish Gulch." He downed another drink.

Jimmy laughed ruefully. "Never saw him do that before. He's usually sober as a judge."

"He's cute," Lucy wrinkled her nose playfully. "He's real cute."

Peg Leg winked at her, threw back his head and began to sing. *"What shall we do with the drunken sailor?"* He bellowed.

"Maybe I better take him home," Jimmy put in. "He must have been drinking all day."

"Sailors are sometimes like that," Lucy agreed tolerantly.

Peg Leg shouted the answer to his own question in a wavering falsetto. *"Put him in the scuttles with the hose pipe on him!"* The Skipper astonished at such a performance cowered trembling against him.

"I'll get him home." Jimmy got to his feet with sudden decision.

* * *

All the way back to the hotel as they staggered together up the street, Peg Leg kept singing and bellowing at the top of his leather lungs. Jimmy helped him awkwardly up the stairs. It almost seemed as if the drunken sailor was making it as difficult as possible. As soon as Jimmy threw open the door, the Skipper made a flying leap to the safety of the chandelier.

Peg Leg continued to give out with salty chanties that were growing progressively more questionable. As Jimmy eased him down on the bed, he broke off abruptly. "Tell everybody in town," he whispered in a perfectly sober voice, "that you're trying to take the stuff out Wednesday night. But don't tell a soul about Spanish Gulch; I'll bet my peg leg we get drygulched there."

The drunken, raucous singing resumed.

Jimmy straighted his shoulders. "You learn fast," he observed. "You'll be chattering like a buckeroo in no time at all. Don't you trust Lucy?"

The singing broke off. "If you're going to marry her, you'll be happy to know she's sound and seaworthy, won't you?"

Jimmy winked down at Peg Leg. "Your leg against that string of pearls, she's square."

Peg Leg held out his hand. "I'll hold the stakes."

* * *

By Wednesday afternoon everything was in readiness. Jimmy's men had constructed the heavy-wheeled wagon, the ore had been cast into a quarter ton and loaded. Peg Leg was driven out to inspect the arrangements.

He nodded his satisfaction, touched the six-shooters at Jimmy's waist. "Those look as handy as a belaying pin. How about getting me a pair? I'm riding along in the wagon with you."

Jimmy didn't protest. "Aye, aye, Captain," he agreed as he went into the house for the guns.

At dusk Peg Leg swung himself up into the bed of the wagon alongside the ore. Jimmy climbed into the driver's seat, picked up the reins and started the big mule team in motion.

Slowly they plodded through the soft dust of the desert. There was no sound save the night sounds of the land. The heavy wagon with its load of ore creaked through the darkness, a black shadow in the moonlight. As they neared the narrow canyon of Spanish Gulch, the Skipper began to jump about excitedly on Peg Leg's shoulder.

"Ahoy," the sailor whispered. "They're waiting for us."

Jimmy pulled sharply on the reins, brought the heavy wagon to a slow stop. Peg Leg could hear the sharp intake of his breath, feel rather than see the sudden rush of blood to his face.

His voice was harsh in the silence. "I've been played!" All his devotion to Lucy turned at this proof of her treachery to hate. "I've been took like a cheap greenhorn!" he cried.

"Aye, that you have; now a sharp lookout aloft. Pipe all hands on deck and clear for action!"

But Jimmy was to angry to keep a sharp lookout; he was not taking this lying down. The blood of the Burleys was up and boiling. He was mad, all six foot two of him. Fighting mad. He lashed the mules into action, stood up in the driver's seat and yelling like a comanche started down into the gulch.

The very speed of their descent saved them. There was a sharp spit of rifle fire to welcome them, the galloping mules, terrified, bolted in a headlong, reckless stampede, rocking the heavy wagon as it lumbered after them.

PEG LEG braced against the heavy ball of ore, saw dim shapes move in the night like ghosts on horse-back. He handled the guns Jimmy had given him like a veteran. They blazed in the night, as bullets spattered against the wagon and rang

He saw one wraith-like rider fall and another as he emptied his guns. It was Peg Leg who first saw the obstruction in the road.

"Hard over to starboard!" he shouted.

The nautical terms confused Jimmy and he sawed frantically on the reins to control the team that was already out of control; all he succeeded in doing was driving straight at the barricade of rocks.

The mules screamed, the stout harness snapped like threads as they broke loose, and the heavy wagon crashed headlong into the boulders. For a minute it poised in mid-air, then the heavy ball of ore overbalanced it, and it broke clean in two. The ore burst free of its moorings and the quarter ton rolled slowly toward them like a deadly juggernaut.

Peg Leg tried to roll clear, only partly succeeded. When the ore came to rest against the wall of the canyon, his iron-bound peg leg was pinned securely under the immense weight.

The Skipper clung to him whimpering.

He lay still. Any moment now he expected the horsemen to ride down on them, finish the job they had started. All around him he heard the sound of stealthy movements.

"Jimmy," he whispered. "Jimmy mate, where are you?"

A dozen feet away he heard a muffled voice. "Pinned under the wagon."

Then unexpectedly they heard a sharp, curt order to retreat. It was not the voice of Andrew Michels; it was a voice neither of them recognized. The shadow-like forms moved slowly, they heard the soft plop of horses' hooves in the dust as the riders scattered.

"Maybe it's a trick," Peg Leg whispered. He was busy unfastening his leg, crawling free of the mass of ore that might begin to move again at any time.

He wormed his way over beside Jimmy. "You hurt bad?"

"My arm's caught."

Peg Leg lay down beside him, braced his back against the dry earth and shoved upward on the front half of the wagon. It gave slowly and Jimmy pulled himself free.

He sat up "Guess it's broke," he said through set teeth.

Peg Leg looked around. If we could catch a couple of those mules, we could hitch 'em to the front of what's left of the wagon and get back to town."

"Thought you never jumped a ship," Jimmy taunted. "Thought you said we'd get the ore through."

Peg Leg laughed. "Blast and belay!" he roared. Ain't nothing gonna happen to that ore. It'll stay there until called for. And you need a doctor."

Jimmy struggled to his feet. "I can walk. I'll get the mules but you'll have to harness them."

Spanish Gulch was quiet. There was no sound save the sounds they made themselves. Peg Leg got to wondering about the two shadows he had seen fall. While Jimmy plodded after the mules he hopped and leaped over the boulders to where he judged he had seen the figure fall.

He found one man, tore the mask off his face. The hard cold features of Smith, his old antagonist stared up at him in the eerie light of the moon. Death had in no way softened the features of the young outlaw. He grunted softly and hobbled further up the canyon side, using his arms and his one good leg as a brace. He could not find the other man. The ground was wet with blood, but the wounded man was not there.

Jimmy grew impatient waiting at the wagon. "Hey!" he shouted.

"I can't find him," Peg Leg called down.

Jimmy tied the mules to the wagon with a one-handed hitch. He held his arm tight against his side as he climbed to join Peg Leg.

"Maybe they took him with them," Peg Leg said as he eased himself down on a rock. "Maybe I only winged him."

There was no sound except that Jimmy made as he slowly climbed the canyon side. Then Peg Leg heard a stealthy movement alongside. He froze, only his eyes turned, saw the dull gleam of moonlight on the barrel of a rifle pointed downward at Jimmy.

His guns were empty. There was no time to warn Jimmy, Peg Leg's hand closed around the butt of the six shooter and he hurled it as he had hurled the whiskey bottle at Smith.

The rifle exploded harmlessly, and the sailor swung, agile as a monkey over the rocks. He landed with a grunt on top of a heavy, reclining figure and pinned it to earth.

"Avast!" he shouted. "This one will look remarkably handsome at the end of a yard arm—on Boothill," he corrected himself.

The fat, ungainly figure beneath him stirred, cried in pain. "Take it easy, I'm shot."

Jimmy reached them at last. "Michels!" he gasped with relief. "No wonder the others faded. Lost their leader."

Peg Leg said dryly, "Now we'll escort this land pirate into port."

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"You never would got me," Michels snarled, "if that pack of yellow-bellies hadn't left me behind."

* * *

IT WAS noon when they reached Rainstorm. The excitement let loose in town by their coming was like the bursting of a dam. Everybody was telling everybody else that they had suspected Andrew Michels all along; people were turning up odd bits of condemning evidence that made the case darker and darker against him. Now that he was safely caught, everybody seemed anxious to help hang him.

Peg Leg snorted his contempt. He let himself be helped to his usual chair on the porch of the hotel. He had no words for anybody. All he wanted, he said, was a stout piece of wood to make himself a new leg.

Jimmy got it for him.

The prominent citizens gathered around to congratulate him. Millissa Roberts was there on the arm of her father. To Jimmy's amazement Peg Leg was being offered the job of Sheriff. The present incumbent had lost his job with the fall of the eminently respectable Mr. Andrew Michels.

"I'm an old sea dog," Peg Leg protested; "I don't know your country."

"You'd make a swell sheriff," Jimmy grinned hopefully. "I still need you around here, and I think Ma'd be pleased if you stayed."

Peg Leg shook his head. "It'll take seven years at sea to wash *all this* land dirt off my hide."

"Besides," Mr. Roberts put in, "the job isn't finished. The job won't be finished until Rainstorm is a peaceful, law-abiding town; you can't make it that by eliminating just one man."

"I'm a sea dog," Peg Leg repeated stubbornly. "It ain't my concern."

Millissa Rroberts looked straight into his eyes. "There was a rumor, Mr—"

"Burley," Peg Leg helped her out. "Same as Jimmy's."

Her lips curved in the beginning of a smile. "Mr. Burley." The smile blossomed. "There was a rumor, you never jumped a ship."

THE COMING OF PEG-LEG

"That's right, Mam." Peg Leg was smiling too. It made him seem younger. His blue eyes twinkled, she was a handsome craft and promised to lie a point nearer the wind than any man had a right to expect. His hand touched his breast pocket where the pearls rested.

"Seems to me, we had a bet, Jimmy." But his eyes were still on Millissa Roberts.

"And you won," Jimmy laughed. "They're yours; I lost my need for 'em, sudden like."

Peg Leg turned then, turned to the Skipper on his shoulder. "How about dry dock for a while, mate?" The monkey chattered excitedly, jumped gaily up and down.

"Soon as I trim up this new leg," he announced briefly, "I'll come see about that Sheriff's berth."

Millissa Roberts held out her hand. "We'll be proud to have you one of us," she said.

Jimmy watched her till she was out of sight. "A mighty trim craft," he observed slyly. "Looks like there isn't the same embargo on seafaring men there is on buckeroos."

Peg Leg turned red under his brown, weathered skin. "Silence, between decks!" he bellowed. "No back chat from the foc'sle hands, you lubber!"

THE END

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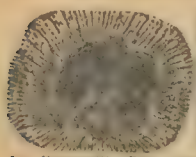

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WHIZZERS

"GUNSMOKE WIDOW"

By John T. Lynch

(Author of "Virginia City Fashion Note")

There was a good reason why Wild Bill Hockock didn't act upon his suspicions about Helen Travis!

WALLY TRAVIS, a small-time gambler, had lost his money within twenty minutes after he had gone into a gambling joint in Saint Louis, one dismal night in 1870. Getting home earlier than usual, he ran into more bad luck—he caught his wife, Helen, in the arms of another man.

Before Wally could lodge a legitimate protest, as an enraged and wronged husband should, Helen glared at him and said, "How dare you come home this early, you little runt!"

"Yeah," the strange man cut in, "who do you think you are? Now get out of here before I throw you out!"

Wally, not wishing to get thrown out of his own house, did as he was told. He ambled around the streets for a couple of hours, then went home again; this time he knocked first. The stranger had departed.

Wally was happy to see that Helen wasn't angry at him.

"Helen," Wally Travis said, "I got a good idea while I was out walkin' around. We can turn this habit of

yours—bringin' strange men home—into a monkey-makin' proposition. We'd work it out this way: You pick up gents that don't look too big or tough, but seem to have lots of money. You bring 'em home an' start to entertain 'em. Then I'll bust in, with my derringer, act sore an' say that I am your husband; then I'll threaten to shoot th' stranger if he don't turn over all th' money he's got on him!"

"Why, that's the old badger game," Helen said. "Now, why didn't we think of that before?"

Wally and Helen played the "badger game" with success in St. Louis, for a time, then they headed farther West. In every town they hit they rented a house on the outskirts, to which Helen would entice luckless victims; she became expert in choosing money-laden greenhorns who would stand to be bluffed by Wally and his derringer.

Wally got so that he could act the part of the irate husband with hardly a quiver in his voice. However, by the time the Travis pair reached Abilene, Helen had become extremely weary of the weak-kneed Wally, and decided to get rid of him, permanently.

IT WAS the usual custom, on nights when they were to play the game, for Helen to go up town to hunt a victim while Wally got completely out of sight by going to a saloon, where he would wait until exactly nine o'clock. Then, at nine-fifteen, on the dot, he would break in on his wife and the amazed victim. Thus, as Wally never saw the victim until he entered the house, he had to leave it up to Helen to pick harmless ones.

On their first evening in Abilene, after securing a little cabin on the outskirts of town, Wally went to a saloon and Helen started to hunt a victim. It was not yet sundown when Helen went into a large grocery store. She had already hatched her plan to get rid of her husband, and she required a special sort of "victim."

Flashing a charming smile at the grocery clerk, Helen said, "My, this

(Continued On Page 92)

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(Continued From Page 91)

is certainly a bustling town, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," smiled the clerk, happy to have the chance to talk to such a beautiful and respectable-looking lady "Abilene's th' end of th' cattle trail up from Texas. Did you want to buy some things?"

"No," Helen said. "I just arrived in town, and will shop here tomorrow. Just now, I am so thrilled at seeing so many men wearing those awful-looking guns, that I just thought I'd ask somebody if they are as vicious as they appear to be."

"Yes, ma'am," proudly grinned the clerk. "They's some real famous gun-toters in this town." He ushered her out on the porch where they could see up and down the busy street. "Maybe I can point out a few of the worst ones for you to see. Then you can tell your friends in the East you saw 'em."

Helen giggled and said, "Oh, that will be lovely."

The clerk looked up and down the street; then he pointed. "There," he said, "see that real young fellow? Looks like an innocent kid, huh? Well, that's Wes Hardin. He don't live here, but he just came up with a cattle outfit, yesterday. I understand a lot of folks is wonderin' if him an' Bill Hickok will get along without no trouble—"

"Oh!" gasped Helen. "Do you mean the famous Wild Bill Hickok? I've heard of him; everybody has, in the East! I'd love to see what he really looks like. Do you see him?"

"No," said the clerk. "But, if you are that curious to see Bill, I guess you could go up to his office—he's th' town marshal." The clerk directed Helen to the marshal's office, and Helen lost no time in going up there. Several men, lounging against the low building, removed their hats, politely, as Helen approached them. "Please don't think me too bold," she said, "But, I am a visitor, and I would like to see Mister Hickok."

A TALL, handsome man, neat and dapper, bowed from the waist, in a sweeping gesture. Helen was admiring his glistening, long, yellow hair, as he straightened up. "*My*

(Continued On Page 94)

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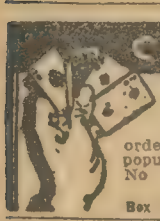

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(Continued From Page 92)

name is Hickok, Ma'am," he said quietly.

Within a few minutes Helen Travis was walking toward her cabin. Bill Hickok was at her elbow. Just how she worked it will never be known, but, at nine-fifteen, that night, when Wally Travis, derringer in hand, stepped into the room, Wild Bill Hickok was standing in the middle of the floor and Helen was in his long arms.

Hickok, who had not removed his coat, nor his gun-belts, glanced toward the door as it flew open. All he waited to notice was the threatening derringer; he jumped back and away from Helen, drew his right-hand six-shooter and took two quick shots at Wally Travis. It was in this second or two that Helen Travis became a widow.

Wild Bill holstered his gun and stepped over to look down at the corpse. "Who is—I mean, who *was* —this gent?"

Helen, giving an excellent imitation of a frightened, innocent woman, on the verge of hysterics, tearfully stated that she hadn't the slightest idea who the man was, nor why he had come busting in like he did.

Bill searched the dead man's pockets for a clue to identification, but found nothing; Helen had thoughtfully removed any incriminating cards or papers that morning.

Although Hickok had his suspicions of what really happened, he had no actual proof. He took the body up to town, and made his official report of the matter, just as it happened. The only thing he did about Helen was to order her to leave town at the earliest moment, and never come back to Abilene. Wild Bill was glad to let it go at that; after all, what would folks think if they knew Wild Bill Hickok had fallen for the old badger game?

THE END

JUDAS PLAYS A TUNE

(Continued From Page 57)

It was Sam Torrmant and his riders and Tommy Lane was with them.

Slim Watterson rolled over and groaned.

Torrmant looked around. "We found the kid, all right," he said. He looked at Kearney, "What the devil's been going on here?"

Maybelle screamed again.

Hudkins said grimly, "She's done better; reckon her throat is raw now." He explained what had happened. But it was Slim Watterson who had filled in the empty gaps.

After Kearney had found oil on Lane's farm he'd tried to freeze Lane out; when that had failed he'd imported Dave Collins, a dapper gunslick, and a woman to pose as his wife. With Collins killing Lane for having an affair with his "wife" Kearney could foreclose on the loan Lane owed the bank.

Dave Collins wasn't dead. He would live to talk. And Maybelle. When Hudkins untied her she'd lost her voice from so much screaming; but she'd have time to get it back in jail, he thought. It'd be nice and quiet there. Hudkins grinned as Sam Torrmant bandaged the wound in his shoulder. Maybe he'd be able to put a piano in her cell. And Dave—well he could play the violin for years—in another cell.

THE END

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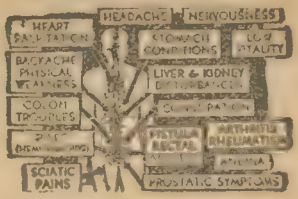

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(Continued From Page 32)

Big Belly's place. They walked in, Big Belly Martin himself retreating from the doorway, whence he'd been watching things, before them. There was something in the Gambler's eyes. Big Belly moved behind the bar, jowls pale.

"Yes, gents. What'll be your pleasure?"

"Two drinks," said the Gambler softly yet coldly. "And be sure the glasses are clean, you pot-gutted dirty coyote!" He even smiled faintly as Big Belly gaped, then hurried to comply.

The Gambler was just lifting his drink when he saw her in the doorway, Augusta Pomm. She walked toward him, chin up, defiant of the fact no decent woman would be seen in a barroom. But her eyes were liquid soft.

"Mr. Banfors," she said, "you have more nerve than any man I've ever seen. You—you'll be returning to Cholla Center, I hope." She lifted a hand and gently touched his strapped-up broken arm.

And the Gambler, resplendent in his gray frock coat and ruffled shirt, somehow fastidious despite the blood stains on them, bowed slightly. "I hope to return, ma'm, for the pleasure of your company."

Augusta said huskily, "I'll be waiting...."

THE END

BOOTHILL WAITS FOR SUNDOWN

(Continued From Page 21)

you said the specialist was, too; you figured on operatin' quick, and the boy was goin' to die under the knife. Then Amos got worried; he writ the specialist hisself; and that letter I read cooked it. He warned you he'd have to write Amos. It was all goin' to blow up in your face. Everything was goin' to blow up in your face. You had to git rid of Amos and Harry, and the fuss about the sunset give you an opening.

"You didn't dare operate on the boy now, and he was gittin' his memory back—he was goin' to know you sure someday. Don's tellin' the boy about the puppies give you your chance there. You asked Don where the puppies was. Then you moved 'em to that rock where you'd set your trap. And I don't need no verifica-

(Continued On Page 98)

HEADLINERS IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

by Eli Colter

HANGMEN OF HOLY HOLLOW

by George Kilrain

2 Powersmoke Feature Novels

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(Continued From Page 97)

tion from you so far, 'cause I know I'm right.

"And there was only one boy; I know that. Amos' boy. And he just wa'nt there when you went to 'find' the bodies. He'd come to and crawled away. Must of give you quite a turn. Where'd you git a body to put there with the woman, so you could 'find' your dead at the right time and start grievin' over 'em? And you better answer."

Baird shrank from the tightened grip of the hands that held him. "I dug up a body from the graveyard, and put some of Willy's clothes on it."

Laribee said, "I figurd it was somethin' like that. Must of give you a turn, too, when he showed up here. You sure been slick, Doc, I give you that. A little too slick, in fact. You shouldn't of told me about that insurance business; nobody but Gilbert would have had that information. If I hadn't knowed I was on the right track before, I knowed it then. I guess that cleans it. Reckon I might's well take you and put you where you belong, Mr. Doc Baird Gilbert."

FROM SOMEWHERE behind Larribee, through the open side window of the saloon, a shot blazed. The gun that belched it was close. The roar blasted through the room, half deafening everybody. Baird took the bullet in the side of his head, and slumped in the grip of the men who held him. The window was bare. In the dusk outside, the street was empty. A voice called through the window. "Sometimes lifers bust out of cells, Sheriff; sometimes they git off for good behavior. He ain't gittin' off."

Larribee turned blandly to survey the men in the room. "Hum. Seems like these here silencers do muffle a gun somethin' wonderful. I didn't hear that shot, did you?"

Joe Beldon said, "What shot?"

Dick Hammond said, "I didn't hear nothin."

Larribee looked down at the body of Doc Baird. The men had let it drop to the floor. "Hum. Well, *you* put him where he belongs then, boys —under six feet of dirt. Come along with me, and Willy, will you, Don? I'd like a word with you."

He walked out of the room with his arm about Willy's shoulders. Willy was still cuddling the coyote pup. Wharton followed them.

As they started up the street, Larribee said, "I jest wanted to advise you not to go worryin' about nearly causin' Willy to fall down a mine shaft, Don. Or about gittin' all balled up about the sunset business. You ain't just got used to things out here yet. What if you never do? Look at Doc Baird. He was one of them that fits right in from the moment he lands. And you won't find nobody bein' very proud of him."

Wharton said, glancing askance at Willy, "You really think there shouldn't be any operation, then?"

Larribee smiled at the boy, striding eagerly along, petting his coyote pup on the head. "You see? All that loud talk and goin's on back there didn't mean a thing. He's forgot it already. He don't reckon it concerns him none; he'll always be that way."

"He won't ever get it all back?"

"Hell, who wants him to! He's smart. He knows his way around. I never seen a happier human bein' in my born days."

"Well, but, Sheriff!" Wharton started to protest.

Larribee grinned. "You got to learn to think wider, boy. What in tarnation is the sense in bringin' back memories that'd only haunt him and scare him? Bein' always happy ain't nothin' to be lightly throwed away. He'll be took care of long as he lives; he'll be richer'n most, for all his wants. What more could you want?"

Willy spoke up suddenly. "Lance. Can I stay at your house tonight?"

"Sure can, Willy. Proud to have you."

"That's swell. I like to stay at your house. I might even stay two days, or three."

Larribee chuckled. "Hum. That so? Sure is okay by me." He winked delightedly at Wharton. "It's okay with me, Willy, if you stay at my house from now on."

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